

HOLOHAUS-3



CONTENTS

NEW ANIMALS [6](#)

character profile [6](#)

Synopsis [10](#)

Last Time [11](#)

USE YOUR FUCKING HEAD [12](#)

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY [92](#)

character profile [92](#)

new posts [93](#)

Synopsis [96](#)

Last Time [97](#)

3.0 [98](#)

MERCENARY PLANET [124](#)

POI datafile [124](#)

Synopsis [130](#)

Last Time [131](#)

PRISONERS & DILEMMA [133](#)

SCARRED ZERUEL [212](#)

character profile [212](#)

changelog [213](#)

Synopsis [218](#)

Last Time [219](#)

HOPE MY RAINS LEAVE A STAIN (Δ) [220](#)

HOME [220](#)

RABANADAS [225](#)

‘CROSS THE BLUR [232](#)



| | |
|---|---------------------|
| THE PRIMACY | 235 |
| GRIEFING | 237 |
| HYPERDEPPED | 244 |
| SEVERITY | 251 |
| HIGHER GROUND | 255 |
| ALWAYS ON | 259 |
| PSYCHOGRAMMA | 270 |
| users | 270 |
| updates | 272 |
| Synopsis | 274 |
| Last Time | 275 |
| PROTOCOL 02.2: TRANSFER II | 276 |
| IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT IN! | 320 |
| character profile | 320 |
| feed profile | 321 |
| Synopsis | 324 |
| Last Time | 325 |
| FAILURE 03: PETITE ANNONCE AMOUREUSE | 326 |
| DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY | 388 |
| character profile | 388 |
| Synopsis | 390 |
| Last Time | 391 |
| RECORD III | 394 |
| NOTES | 474 |



LESCIGISI
AET
TUCS2
WCCNM2WM
WAECEM02
NINENBV
COMMOD0
BIS02
EBV0100'
NGLVICE2
22E
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211
D0G0V
1020W
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SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher McDonell for creatures

to nekosattva for shedded selves

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to Amara Reyes for the arrived

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who sees this

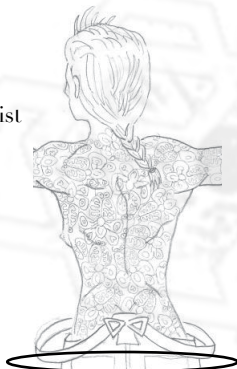


NEW ANIMALS

by: Escher McDonell

NEW ANIMALS

Name: Amelia Wallach
Birthday: August 24, 2XXX
Occupation: Illegal myrmecologist
Sex: F
Blood type: AB-
Likes: Ants
Dislikes: Stupidity
Seen with: works alone



[[from Personnel Control KM dossier 201.516.91. KH: Neptune. REQUEST WAITING EXPURGATION PENDING SUCCESSFUL APPEAL FROM INFORMATION CONTROL. See grey literature file AH101-23.1 for details.]

While Information Control has pushed for terminating Wallach, I recommend we sustain our veto. I'm not convinced she's a lost cause. IC's permanent presumption that any information deviant is an ideological hazard does not hold true. (And I maintain that their mania for purging info hazards demands intervention from the JCO. The scientific underground is doing useful work.)

character profile



IC's reasoning for termination is as follows: she fought in the Baffin War, where she was sexually involved with the current director of Animal Control. There, she witnessed the first documented new animal replacement, deserting shortly afterwards without collecting her quite substantial pay. She has a lifelong interest in ecology. We have no information about her life prior to her involvement with Amethyst & Power — she's among those whose identity was lost on Sunny Sunday. In the absence of psychosubstrate to profile, circumstances (at least according to our colleagues in IC) suggest a principled opposition to the JCO.

This amounts to a tenuous argument. Evidence supports my hypothesis that ideology has nothing to do with Wal-lach's reluctance to take up government work. She's possessed by libidinous pragmatism. If she has an objective, it is to know.

This is what disturbs me. Not that she's misguided. She'd shown no ideological affiliation prior to war and has shown none after. Nothing in her behaviour demonstrates she's among the many afflicted by some juvenile political grudge against the government for our public safety policies. What does that leave IC with? She likes nature. She's

world logs



mad that it's dying. Plenty are. Most of those are liberals, and we have many liberals at the JCO.

No. She has contempt for the JCO because she thinks we're stupid. Any literature we have traced to her invariably includes some argument that AC's method for managing the crisis won't work, with a convincing outline of why it won't work.

And where I write she thinks, I worry that I should write she knows. I've read the literature in question and her powers of insight and analysis would be the envy of a veteran knowledge auditor. I recommend we continue seeking her assistance with the present crisis whether or not recruitment is possible.

I furthermore insist we issue an edict to IC that they are not to pursue her with the usual methods. I hope this case of IC overreach prompts the JCO to take IC's escalating headstrong tendencies seriously. They cannot continue if we hope to manage the changes forecasted in the coming year.

Recommendation denied. Information Control's autonomy must be preserved for the effective performance of its duties.



XXXXXXXX

Director, Joint Control Office



world logs



NEW ANIMALS

Synopsis

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

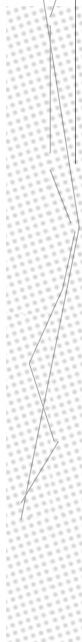
creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.





Last Time

essin moves from shift to shift to the occasional rave, where they find precarious connection amid the empty fields and parking lots with lajie oster





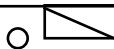
CW: apocalypse, IRL climate apocalypse, cognitive decline, divorce, parental abandonment, totalitarianism, information suppression, paranoia, body horror, disabling injury, death, dissection, impersonation/replacement, sexual intercourse (mildly explicit), sex with power dynamic (teacher-student)

“What scares me most about the new atmosphere—and it’s already here—is the chemistry we’ve infected it with makes it harder to think. We’ve made air that literally makes you stupider. I don’t believe we can just think ourselves free of this problem but I know we won’t be able to fight it if we can’t use our f***ing heads.”

-[OMITTED KH NEPTUNE], personal interview, CBC News Hour, July 5, 2XXX

NEW ANIMALS

USE YOUR FUCKING HEAD



Essin's mother discarded suburban life in the night.

For a long while before, something icy glistened in her rationed gaze. She watched the sky or rippling tree-leaves for an age muttering about unseen roving wind-carved geographies but looked at Essin so rarely that even as a child they couldn't have told you, with certainty, the colour of her eyes.

One five AM Essin woke sleep-numb from easy dreams to the downstairs door thumping softly shut, then suitcase wheels rattling down the driveway to a waiting taxi. Neither parent granted the divorce bureaucratic legitimacy they weren't interested in wasting time with legal grappling as they detached from each other's lives.

Perhaps in moments caught by sudden recollection, Essin wondered what wedge split their parents. They'd loved each other enough to bring about Essin's life, but not enough to collaborate on it. Neither offered explanation and it never occurred to Essin that this was something a child might want.

What arrived sharp, when they remembered, was their mother's tobacco slipping under their bedroom door on the nights she was up until the sun broke in the study,



clattering on the keyboard.

Back then Essin often slipped from school. During the jostling return from recess, they hid in bushes or behind a hill-crest until it was safe to bolt. Sometimes they'd just sit on empty park swings and watch babysitters herd tottering children, and sometimes they'd drift around the neighbourhood, follow breezes, find shortcuts, crouch by ant-hills to watch the ants' chaotic engineering. Hooky high-schoolers adopted them some afternoons: they'd give Essin cigarettes, buy them a freezie, ask them lewd questions and laugh at their answers. When nobody claimed them, Essin spent afternoons sitting on ridges or in fields, watching the sky. And now and then they went home.

The walkway stones were dyed algal green, the garden overrun by luxuriating weeds. Their mother sat on the porch on her lawn chair, sunlight-freckled through a swaying dogwood. She wore her tracksuit pyjamas, her ratty baby-blue slippers set on the rough straw doormat like chew toys crusted with slobber from a geriatric dog. Big glasses goggled her face, and she held her body in crosses, arms crossed, legs crossed, toes crossing and uncrossing while she monitored the progress of the clouds. Her fingers gently scissored a shrinking cigarette, the other hand



wetted by the condensation on her gin and tonic. A dead leaf clung to her shirt. Her thin neck seemed to impossibly support her giant head at an awkward angle.

Many heartbeats passed after she had to have heard Essin coming up the path. When she did look at them it was like she had to assemble who she was seeing, and after recognizing them her gaze returned to the sky.

“Oh,” she said, rubbing her left eye with a knuckle, “It’s you. What’s up?”

Essin looked up to try to see what she was seeing.

A crow overhead plucked dry laughter from the air.

“Nothing much,” said Essin.

“What day is it today?” she asked.

“Tuesday.”

“Fuck,” she said, “I was hoping it was Thursday. Tuesday? Seriously?”

Essin nodded. She set down her g’n’t, removed her glasses, thoroughly rubbed her eyes with her wrists. Her brass



watch had migrated halfway down her forearm, and faced in. She blinked at it.

“Is school out early today?”

“No.”

She puffed her cigarette. Glanced around the weed-infested garden—clovers and thistles carpeted the soil. Digger wasps were widening their holes with tiny stones—she’d shown Essin once, pointing it out, Even insects use tools.

“Where’s your bag?”

“At school.”

She nodded, flicked the butt hissing into a coffee-can half filled with filthy rainwater and pulsing young mosquitos.

“Let me brush my teeth, and we’ll go get your bag.”

In the car, she lit another cigarette and rolled down the window before backing out the driveway. At red lights she half-heartedly neatened her frazzled hair with a pinkie.

“Did you have lunch?”

Essin shook their head.



"Wanna go to Tim's?"

"Sure," they said.

She took them to the neighbourhood's edge. One day the bulldozers would arrive and churn the cornfields and in that churning attract grey gulls who'd fall in the backhoes' wakes on the unearthed grubs and from this excavation would come condominiums and plaster boxes where orthodontists would correct the god-given configuration of children's teeth and suburban entrepreneurs would quest after that zombie state America's delusions by opening cafes that specialized in one hybrid pastry or another each new constructed layer hunching in on the last as if everything had a need to face away from the outer lands, their woods and marshes, the farmer's fields with their rippling soybean crops that painted the miles between this city and its satellites. For a few years more, corn would rise through the summer and turn gold in the fall, so high and close to the road that crosses populated the ditches, marking where cyclists and motorists had sacrificed life for speedy transit.

Essin looked out across the mud fields, where lingering elms and ashes marked farmland edges. They were young enough that the passenger side still felt new. The soil and





its corn as distant as the moon, and like the moon visited only by specialists in special rovers.

Essin ordered a bagel, sesame seed with cold cuts, and a chocolate milk. Their mother, a wrap and an iced capp. They turned back to the fields to go to the school, but partway out she cocked her ears and pulled over to the gravel margin.

“You hear that?” she said.

Essin looked at her, gripping the paper bag that held their sandwich.

She popped the car door, stepped out. They leaned against the side of the car, faced the brown fields. Trucks and vans rushed past them, but at that time they didn’t go through so often and wind had time to gutter to silence.

“Listen,” said their mother.

She set her drink on the car roof and droplets pearly on its side. She lit a third cigarette and smoke rags whipped around her cheeks.

And Essin heard the frogs.



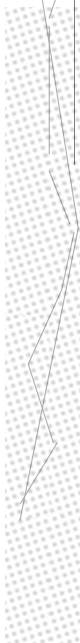
They were unseen in the meadows? The ditches? Perched on leaves or leaping in puddles? It was day, and they were peeping and whooping and bellowing, amid the crickets and cicadas, loud throats across and over the still-brown-turning-green their song thick as glass encasing all points from there to all horizons.

Essin tasted the sweetness of the bread, the crunching lettuce and bland tomato. They looked down to the ditch, which was an opaque murk. But here and there where its water touched the slope up to the field, its gray surface rippled in rings and squinting Essin saw two dark eyebeads, a snout pressing the meniscus.

Their mother sipped her drink. When she finished her cigarette, she flicked it into the ditch where it hissed. A truck roared and filled the air with a smell like pungent, fresh-cut wood: its back was laden with logs and emerald ash-borers sprayed from its side. Essin, half-conscious of the act, brushed one from their hand.

They listened to the frogs while the sun tilted down to the land.

After Essin fetched their bag from its cubby, the vice principal talked to their mother. They sat in a waiting area in





front of a busy secretary. Though the women looked completely different, their mother and the VP, the scene of them through the glass to that room reminded Essin of a betta fish in a pet store vexed by its own reflection.

When they went back home their mother told Essin to fix a snack if they got hungry. The study door swung shut with a muffled thump. Her keyboard began a steady clatter that would last until dawn. Essin spent the afternoon on the floor with a magnifying glass, trying to see dust mites in the carpet. They thought about the frogs. Life clambering and invisible that filled the world with sound. Animals improbably abundant, laid in a clear gel, that lived one life, then lived another.

Throughout the years after she left they sometimes went on sprees, watching interviews with her, until they realized it was probably bad for their mental health and stopped. The last they heard from her, their mother was on the west coast studying a phenomena where something corroded the structural integrity of a starfish's core. This central weakness meant as its legs travelled after food, each leg pulled the starfish apart.



Lacie lingered through that day and night and into the next day. At some point she said don't worry, nobody's waiting for me and didn't elaborate. Around four they ordered a thin and stringy roast chicken from Swiss Chalet.

Essin learned her body by daylight. She was freckled, muscular. She started mornings with pushups and yoga. Her armpit bristles smelled sweet and her sweat was cut with something like the salted Japanese plums Essin once bought having read they were a breakfast food in Japan. She dug through the laundry baskets where Essin kept their clothes and cocooned herself in their flannels, which were huge so she curled up the sleeves. They talked, and napped, and read, legs tangled. Lacie called in sick to her shifts. When Essin returned to the basement from frothing milk and stuffing blenders with syrup and ice, Lacie said she'd been, "Gnawing on books all day."

At work Essin thought about Lacie tying their hands together with a bind improvised from a pillow case. On break thinking on it the fever drove them to the bathroom to touch themselves and they missed eating lunch and were quivery until their next break.

She grabbed their arm. Pulled it towards her. Licked syrup crystals from the hairs.





On Sunday when Essin got home Lacie was gone.

For three days they shook, calling in sick and burying their face in clothes that still held her smell.

Until the door knocked. Lacie stood outside, a hefty duffel bag hung from both hands.

“What?” she said. Essin studied the veins in her eyes. She wore the blue and green plaid flannel shirt they’d assumed had vanished with her. “I wanted to come into work and ask but you weren’t there.”

She added her clothes to Essin’s, and wedged her few books between theirs so just from looking you couldn’t tell whose books belonged to who. She plugged her weighty, beaten-up laptop (a laptop! How’d she get a laptop?) into a jutting outlet with a cracked plastic front. On a dusty, paint-spotted radio older than either of them the CBC muttered through a static jitter. They were interviewing the Chief.

“The new,” he said, “Is uncomfortable. But it shouldn’t scare us. We need to take these challenges for opportunities. Thrive on change. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.”



The broadcast transitioned to indie pop stuff laced with fiddle riffs. Lacie wrestled a basement window open with a wooden crack. Loamy air rolled in.

“When’s the last time you washed these?” she rubbed the sheets between two fingers and heat rose to Essin’s cheeks.

“Are you okay? You haven’t said a word.”

They didn’t want to answer.

“I figured,” said Lacie. Trailed off. “I don’t know.”

The pillowy doorstops keeping Essin’s mouth shut stayed softly in position.

“We interrupt our regular broadcast for an emergency announcement from the Office of Information Control. At fifteen twenty-two today, Animal Control confirmed that cardinals were replaced late on the night of June 23rd. Studies are underway to confirm whether new cardinals present a threat to human safety.”

“We’ll need to think up an origin story for us.” She half-whispered. Essin felt a need to say something but couldn’t place where “Hey, come here. Are you mad? I thought you’d be happy. Wait, were you worried? I said I



wanted to keep you.”

Essin sat on the bed next to her. She set a hand around their hip and nudged up their black pajama t-shirt where it worked free at their hips. They worried about how much they smelled like someone who worked at Starbucks who hadn’t showered since their shift three days ago.

“I was thinking,” she said.

“Recreation Control urges that the public avoid wooded areas until the danger level is established and Animal Control applies population demolition solutions.”

“What about,” she said, “What about if we went to elementary school together? Isn’t that romantic.”

When it broke they weren’t sure why.

“Middle school,” Essin said.

“Why?”

“No idea,” Essin scabbled to grip some fading mental image. “It feels accurate though.”

She looked up and scrutinized the ceiling. Footsteps



thumped on wood from the landlord's boots. The same radio broadcast echoed tinny through the dry silver ducts from elsewhere in the house.

"And we met again at your work and started catching up," she continued.

"Yeah," they said.

"Simple."

"Yep."

"We didn't fuck in front of strangers in a landfill."

Fingers on their neck, nail brushing cheek-down. They really did smell.

"We remind our listeners to report any new animal sightings. The Joint Control Office cannot protect the public without your help. Do not attempt to fight any hostile new animals on your own. You will die. Animal Control thanks you for your cooperation."

Lacie leaned over and set her tongue on a dot of mocha syrup on Essin's knuckle.





A lawnmower motor bellowed with ludicrous mechanical volume outside.

All Essin's tender arsenal detonated at once.

And they plunged into July.

They expected sensation to fade but it instead struck with mounting force: when they watched Lacie immersed in a book or when she tied them up in the boiler room for the night and they rested happy mapping and memorizing the hairline fractures in the concrete floor or when she picked the last bits of food off her plate and wiped the grease from her fingers on her pants or when her hair was disheveled as a drunken robin's nest and then with a few hand movements was crisp as a master folder's origami toad.

She had them leap the backyard fence by climbing up on the compost bin (flies stirring blind in the night) to suck on joints on the path behind the house. Watch the road. The yellow moon like a cleanly-cut crescent from a thumb shaved by a deli slicer.

It was occasional at first, something that surfaced like a seal girdled in white surf that disappeared before you



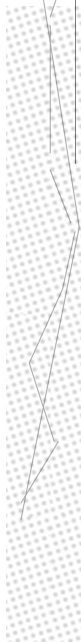
knew for certain what you'd seen.

"I read the other day that they're still looking into the change mechanism," she said. "Though like, we're not supposed to know it's unknown and just assume that it's too technical for us to understand, you know." Essin didn't know. "Don't repeat that in public."

She sometimes alluded to a mysterious editor friend who'd been subject to an accidental weapons discharge during a control action by IC. Unease wormed near Essin's bones. "So everyone's kind of panicky."

It was clear that Lacie didn't like the government, but when the government started giving classes on new animals she insisted that they go together. Partly, she said, she wanted to expose Essin to this facet of the world which (if they were being honest) they hadn't paid attention to and seemed about as real to them as magic crystals or reality TV shows where tacky ladies help ghosts pick their daughter's wedding dresses.

She brought them to class at the Sportsplex. She carried a dollar-store notebook and a gnawed mechanical pencil with the clip missing. They went to a grey, windowless room off the lobby. The presenter half-heartedly cleared





her throat, then launched into a speech:

"This course is part of series provided by Information Control on recent natural phenomena. As such, it is approved by Information Control using only the best information available to the National Research Council. All information learned at this session is to be considered authoritative. The content of these sessions is government property and should not be discussed with people not attending Information Control-sanctioned public education programs. Anyone sharing information learned in these classes agrees that, by learning this information, they have voluntarily accepted any legal repercussions caused by their own unauthorized dissemination of that information. Information Control may periodically provide you with false information for the purposes of gathering data." She sighed, smiled in a meek way that didn't touch the bland expression from her nose up. "The Joint Control Office: Control is in Our Name!"

While she talked, Essin scouted out the people in the room: A hippy type spangled in cheap, handmade, vaguely-ethnic jewelry and a shifty pale guy in a black t-shirt that read: "All The Happinesses Are Blossom In Love" with katakana under it and near the front a wizened lesbian couple



with clipboards, wearing t-shirts given out to people who volunteer with NGOs. Beside them sat a middle-aged guy, wedged uncomfortably onto the chairs in a sports polo with a buzz-cut who looked like in his prime he could have torn the axels off an eighteen-wheeler, glancing anxiously at the group around him between pretending to pay attention to his iPad, which even though it was an antique must've cost a mint in import fees alone.

And as the presenter fiddled with the portable projector that they clearly hadn't practiced with, Essin caught someone sitting among the others who'd slipped through their first noticing.

It was cloying hot outside and air conditioning in this part of the building was weak and yet she wore long sleeves. She was maybe twenty-three, no twenty-six? But weathered. Thirty? Thirty five? Behind her pimples and her rat tail she had this subtle air like she lived in the woods on a house that roved on bird legs, and soared by moonlight in a flying mortar and pestle. She'd seated herself (deliberately, Essin was sure) in a reach near the middle-back that never get called on. Essin'd used the same trick to slip through high school. It was a disguise, they knew, from the half-defiant way her eyebrows twitched when the video





started.

It began with the bright acoustic alternating chord garbage that plays when infomercial narrators rattle off the devastating side effects of boner pills, lively as an electrocuted cadaver. The video was followed by interviews with people wearing inoffensive, semi-professional clothes, representing major ethnic demographics, introducing themselves and telling their stories about the new animals and their new animal journeys. New animals touched their lives and they prospered. Economic boons rose from the new animals: skins and secretions for refining petroleum, hormones and serums for pharmaceuticals, glands and pigments for cosmetics, new animal jobs bursting in industry, agriculture, research, and control.

Giddiness flooded Essin but when they looked to Lacie she had an expression like she was being reduced to a cube by a trash compactor. At intermission she grabbed their hand as they rose to talk to the strange woman in long sleeves.

"Golden," an interviewee was saying as the presenter struggled to pause the video, "We have a golden opportunity, an opportunity to make a golden future from these new animals. All we have to do is seize it!"

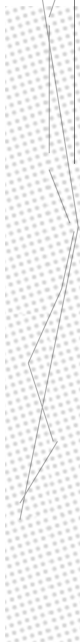


The two stood in an abandoned nook for half-empty snack machines. Lacie breathed. The machines hummed. Her throat bobbed as she fought something down. Gold is the buzz-word, Essin thought. They leaned to where she was veiled by her hair and tried to look into Lacie's half-watering eyes. She glanced up. "I'm fine."

The Chief streamed his pressers on the gibber and spoke on the radio.

"Gold horizons, folks. Horizons of new animals. Beasts of new industry, of the new world we're all making here. Jobs and economic growth, right here folks, in this country. The people before me sent the jobs away. Well, since Sunny Sunday, we know that was the wrong call. What happens if the sun shines again like it did that Sunday? More debt, that's what. More needing to rely on foreign aid to get the economy jumping. But animals can't be killed off so easy by the sun. That's the ticket. Our journey's just beginning. All aboard!"

The Chief loved scrums and seemed to almost get off on having mics shoved in his face. He didn't have a single bad angle. Rallies had been the millennium's political fad so





far, but instead he stood outside parliament every day and met with people face to face, a redundant security detail leaning on the parliamentary parapets. Assurance trickled from his mouth.

“Me and all the other world leaders have been talking about this. We can’t allow the natural world to force us from the course. This is a challenge, and like all challenges, it is really just an opportunity, a golden opportunity, to create growth and support our nation’s families. To that end, we have some of the best brains on Earth working around the clock to make our journey a fruitful one.”

Smooth as a lake on a stagnant August day, sheathed in the comforting exoskeleton of a yokel uncle with a deep wisdom about money. Something mediocre in its goals and unimaginative in its vision for the world that had mastered the art of pursuing beige dreams with the conviction reserved for zealots.

A tiny moving picture of the man on a lap top screen chatting to bushels of microphones cracked Lacie’s cool. She fell on the bed as if bit by a snake and pressed the balls of her palms to her sockets. She yelled.

“Fucking bullshit!”



And gulped air for protracted screaming into pillows.

A pause in the clink and patter of the landlord's cooking upstairs said he'd heard it.

"He could be telling the truth," Essin said.

"No," she said, "No he can't."

"Why not?"

The Chief let off a zinger and a spray of chuckles sounded from the press brigade.

"Look!" she said, pointing to the laptop, "There isn't a drop of sweat on him! How can people be so cool? The world is fucking ending!"

Upstairs the stove fan roared on. Their landlord's slippers peeled from the kitchen's linoleum tiles.

Essin looked at the screen, news coverage switching to a panel of pasty, smiling commentators. Looked back at Lacie.

She wore one shirt every week when she was at home, changing into it when she got back from work. That week's





was white, collar and armpits stained a faint grey. Essin didn't understand what it was about this, the stains she left on her clothes, like the callouses where the tender ankle met her foot-soles, that made them shudder. Nausea touched them when they realized they were fixed on these details and not what she was saying. They pillowed their head on her stomach. Her voice box crackedled through her guts like frogs croaking over fields, the long low rhythm of her lungs like the high wind over late spring stubble, the gurgle in her gut not in truth like anything but closeness to another person.

"They don't know shit," she muttered, "If they do know shit, they're lying. The people who definitely know shit are terrified to talk about it. Fuck."

With their head against her stomach, Essin felt like they must have a telepathic connection that would make up for how little they listened, and they thought they saw the shapes in her mind that were so like the billowing dark venomous bells of jellyfish in the sea. They thought about it and then did it, slipping their fingers into her shirt. Their tips dipped gently towards her belly button, lingered on a big mole they had seen many times but hadn't jotted down in memory until just then.



The Chief rolled on with his presser while she wriggled to their circling fingers.

"We've got plans, folks. Yes they are ambitious, but I've never been a person to step down from ambition. We need to watch out for cargo-culting ourselves. When things get new, we get new. Yes folks, prosperity. Gold, we're talking. These are golden times for us, a golden age, if we keep our heads screwed on right. Stay the course. Stick with the Chief, stick with the right guy to lead you on your journey."

Yet Lacie insisted on going back to the government class the following week. What else can she do? was the extent of Essin's feelings and they were just happy to be with her even though each class cost enough to cover both their groceries for a week.

"I'm Amelia."

She'd snagged them in the intermission between classes by the snack machines. Essin's Baba Yaga. At her wrist they saw the vertex of something that could be mistaken for a mole but was a tattoo peeking out from the gap between her watch and cuff.





"I'm Lacie. This is my partner."

"Essin," said Essin.

"Pretty dull classes, eh?"

"They aren't telling us anything," said Lacie.

"I know, right? But I keep coming."

"Knowing something is better than knowing nothing at all," said Lacie.

"That isn't strictly true," said Amelia. "If you have no information and you're just assessing what's going on you'll often react better than if you've internalized the wrong information. 'Knowing stuff'," she threw up scare quotes with her fingers, "Takes up space that should be dedicated to using your head."

"Yeah I guess you're right," Lacie said.

"That said," she lead them outside, cigarette over her ear, and hit a crossbar with her butt. They stepped out into the smell of parking lot minerals in summer and her rattail flew on the dry wind. "The best thing to have is the truth."



"For sure," said Lacie.

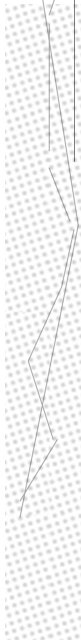
For a moment Amelia said nothing. She pulled her cigarette from over her ear and took it in the corner of her mouth. Dusk crept over the neighbourhood, and a few stray magenta-stained clouds marbled a corner of the sky. She fished a lighter from her pockets.

"If you're interested, we'd love if you could join us this Sunday," and pulled out a half-crushed leaflet as well, passed it to Lacie. Like a Mormon thing, with airbrushed humans, bright-clothed, playing and embracing in short-grass pastures with bears and sheep and deer. Something was off. Essin squinted. The animals were wrong. The deer on the cover wasn't a regular deer, but a new deer, pink petal antlers sipping from a holy sun. The bear had a human face. The sheep, at least, were normal.

Her grey smoke dispersed on the summer air.

"Think about it."

Essin woke the next morning with a guttering feeling, like they were the fire on a Dollarama scented candle toyed





with by a winter draught. To say it was “dawning” was to discredit the beauty of the dawn and to say it was “falling” was to discredit the thrill in the fall. No, it was like someone had freed starving minks into a kettle barn where the chickens are fat, de-beaked, and bow-legged. New animals spun in their mind, rumours and pictures and stories stinging the canthus, like dry mucus flecks on a day when you haven’t washed your face.

They recalled a story about a kid mauled by a tornado of whirling mandibles (the new wolverine), and sitting at Andrew Hayden park for a work picnic, looking out at the river seeing chitinous insectoid yachts (the new water strider), and hadn’t they been online at the library and scrolling and seen blurred images taken from the inner sanctum of a chittering maze (the new jackal)? When had work started demanding they burst into their own store with guns and check closets for creatures?

And from the tops of the green hills at the dog park, or spotted squinting through the haze as they stood at the neighbourhood’s edge on a walk after work: the lumbering two-legged wooden titans amid the distant trees, the engines assembled by new beavers. Animal Control helicopter spraying their backs with firebombs, and even though



Essin could hear the chitter and screech of the new beavers on the wind, the smoke off the wicker colossi's writhing back seemed no stranger to them at the time than a fallow field's controlled late-summer burn.

It had been background racket, sirens and birdsongs and traffic. Classes were useless but Amelia had catalyzed something. Like when they'd been taught the differences between flies and bees and suddenly recognized half the garden creatures they thought might sting them were mimics. Before, they'd drifted through the new animals like they'd drifted through the Exxeon Fossil Gallery at the Museum of Nature, eyes hooked on the petrified shells and whorls, beings that luxuriated in time before death cradled them in rock palms and all their complexity became flat traces smeared on shale eucharists.

Lacie had become laconic. She was stiff when they nuzzled her and her fucks were mechanical. She spent hours immersed in her beat-up old laptop typing and when Essin asked what she was doing, she said, "Working on something." She finished dinner quick and went back to the bed and her laptop while Essin worked the dish pile. They weren't sure what her silence meant and the feeling they'd stumbled left serpents writhing in their gut, sharpening





whenever they saw it: the church leaflet Amelia had given them. It had grown more crinkles, its folds white and frayed, corners warped from thumb-sweat.

In that vertiginous moment Essin pressed their face to the down of Lacie's neck, heard a distant mouth that might have been theirs mutter the phrase, I'm so scared, a voice so choked that it became nothing but each S striking the letter next to it.

It amazed them that such slight sounds, heard by the right person, were enough.

A half voice answered back, "We should go to church."

"What?"

"That lady. Amelia. Her church. We should go. They have Bible classes."

Essin said, "Bible classes?"

Lacie said, "Don't worry about it. The minister is a man named Charles Darling. He's a zoologist."



Lacie said they had to hold hands, “So it looks like we’re just out for a walk.”

Since meeting at the landfill they didn’t often touch each other in public. Essin was concerned about the significance of this but was more worried about bringing it up. It was nice, for a while, to feel like fifteen-year-olds or those elderly couples they sometimes saw walking hand-in-hand to their coffee.

They left the newer developments, heading for the neighbourhood’s decrepit center.

The trees were broad-trunked, tall, and dying. Ferns and saplings burst from rotting detritus accumulated in eaves-troughs. As a kid drifting through the neighborhood they’d called this quarter Moss Land: grey lichens spotted lamp-post cement, green mosses spread like comforters across rooftop shingles, lawns a weedy green fur shaded by stout but structurally-dubious trees, bark bearded and hoary. Above it all crisscrossed power lines, cell phone towers, and satellite dishes, black wires garnished with dangling sneakers or white bird shit flecks. Stale water, puddled in random bins or driveway potholes, was ubiquitous. Black-winged damselflies gathered around it, feasting on midges.





Tricycles and secondhand play structures presided over sandbox shovels and dollar-store balls all sun-bleached on one side, but since it was supper time, all the children were indoors or in the backyards where their parents fanned seared meat smells through the streets.

Lacie led them down to a cul-de-sac to a house whose empty driveway was littered with white petals the shape and size of printed commas.

With the nail of her index finger, she tapped a pattern on the white, rust-freckled door. Essin's palms leaked enough sweat to saturate a sponge. They didn't know why.

That's a lie.

They knew.

She wore an Exxeon Fossil Gallery tyrannosaurus skeleton tee over a grey long-sleeved shirt. They glanced at her forearms.

Her shirt had been neatly rolled to her elbows. Essin's eyes skipped across rings, watch, bracelets, scars that gestured to some rough shit gone by. Tattooed sleeves swept up from her wrist, across her forearm, past the elbow,



disappeared in her shirt where, Essin had no doubt, colors swept over her entire body. It was a tessellation. Like those prints by that geometry-obsessed artist they'd seen in the National Gallery on a school trip. Interlocking yet distinct creatures Essin didn't recognize. At first they assumed they were extraterrestrials, since they had distended brains rendered whorl by whorl with the most delicate jabs of a tattooist's needles.

"New ants," said Amelia.

Just then they caught with a horrible bottoming feeling that they'd stared at the tattoos longer than was socially acceptable.

"Oh, sorry, sorry."

"It's fine. Good you could come." But didn't step out of the way. Lacie glanced at Essin and then back to the woman in the door. "Church is cancelled this week, unfortunately."

"Um... I read the ad in your pamphlet."

"Ad?" she said, "What kind of ad?"

"It took me a few hours to read it."



(Lacie later mentioned that it was written in a baroque, multi-stage cipher.)

“Good,” Amelia nodded. “Come in. Lock the door behind you.”

The blinds were drawn. The lights were off. The group padded up a short hall. A door gently brushed over clean carpet and Amelia gestured down to a basement where soft light glowed.

An old gigantic tube TV sat on a dark wood cabinet, its blank blue screen staring at the room. By that eery blue and one dim floor lamp, a handful of people sat with their legs half-crossed on a cheap rundown rug half-covering concrete. Essin tried to scout out who else was in the room and saw their class had been transposed: the hippy type spangled in cheap, handmade, vaguely-ethnic jewelry and the pasty guy wearing a shirt that read “Happy Happy Spongey Spongey,” with katakana referencing some gibber toon and the old lesbian couple with their NGO shirts and the hulking middle-aged body builder. There was a new kid who couldn’t have been a day older than fifteen.

Nobody greeted each other or acknowledged their mutual recognition. No notebooks or clipboards. The older guy



didn't have his iPad.

"Dump your shit and any writing materials you brought there," she gestured to a side table where bags had been piled.

Amelia slid over to where a baroque assembly of adapters tethered an archaic beige PC to the television, tapped a few keys to bring up the first slide of her Powerpoint and stood in front of the group.

She spoke without hesitations, pauses, or clearing her throat. Her words flowed from her diaphragm so her voice carried clear to the back.

"Hello," she said, "Welcome. My name is Amelia. I'm not certified by the government or any institute of higher learning, but I studied under some of the biggest names in underground zoology — Rondelle, Thrush, Javier, Terry, and, of course, the esteemed Charles Darling. My area of expertise is new ants. I've collaborated on over forty underground papers on new ant physiology, behaviour, and religion. In the course of my experience I have suffered clinical brain death on eight occasions. Above my qualifications as a neo-mymecological psychopomp, I know how to survive new animals. That's all you need to know about





me. Time for ground rules.

“Don’t leave early. If you try, there will be consequences.

“Don’t write anything down. Not even after you leave. Listen and remember. Information control can steal your notebooks, but all their brain scanners can read is childhood fears and things that make you horny. They use those to make you think they can extract anything from your brain, but if you stick to your guns it won’t do much good in a knowledge audit.

“Our location changes every week. You’ll be given detailed directions at the end of every class. Memorize them. Share them with nobody. If you share them, expect consequences. This means that you don’t miss class. If you miss even one, you’ll never find us again.

“The fee is five dollars per class, payable at the start of class, every class. Otherwise, expect consequences. All proceeds go to feeding me and funding Darling’s research into new animals.

“There will be no handouts. You must find your own texts during the week. These are Charles Darling’s Friendly Field Guides and finding them is your sole homework as-



signment. The underground press stashes them around town. I can't offer you any tips or hints on where to find them because that's information I don't have. Use your heads.

"Don't ask to see Charles Darling. If you ever end up seeing Charles, it means you've ended up in a scientifically-interesting situation. Scientifically-interesting typically means fatal. If you are in a situation you believe may be of scientific interest, you may call the Darling hotline. I'm going to show you this number with my hands now. Memorize it.

"If you have an emergency, or see a new species of new animal, or have any pertinent Animal Control activity to report, dial this number. Don't worry if Information Control has your house bugged, the number goes through a new muskrat we've secured in high orbit. You may hear voices. These aren't recordings, but you should disregard them, since they won't respond to you. Say as much as you can about the situation. Hang up when you're done. Don't call again about the situation. Darling will show up or he won't. Be prepared to manage on your own.

"Don't share this number with anyone. We will find out if you do. Expect consequences.



"Yes? This isn't kindergarten. If you have a question just spit it out."

The scraggely fifteen-year-old dropped his hand. "Is it ok if I ask what smells like smoke?"

"Yes, and what do you think smells like smoke?"

"I don't see ashtrays anywhere. Is the oven on?"

"The oven isn't on."

"Today's... lesson?"

"Is that a question?"

"Yes."

"I was about to say something nice. Fine." Amelia was standing in front the cabinet supporting the TV. She balled a fist and thumped on a door and it sprang open. Tension hit the room like dust fanning from a city-crushing titan's footstep. People leaped for the stairs.

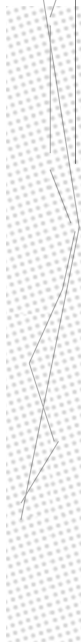
"Remember what I said about leaving early!" she barked.

It was new. A new. Essin wasn't sure what and it seemed clear that nobody could tell and they didn't calm even



when they saw that it was penned up in a hamster cage on a pile of shattered crockery. Something like an emulsified salamander if each bubble was an amber eye and somebody had repeatedly stretched its skin out on a board with nails. Sooty smoke issued steadily from cysts along its spine.

“Calm down,” said Amelia, like someone wrangling children who’d just seen a hornet. “If you’re safe when you’re learning, you aren’t learning shit. Even so, this guy can’t get out from this cage. He’s mesmerized by horizontal lines, see?” Essin looked. It hadn’t moved and was bristling in terror at the bars. Its padded toes shook where they clutched its potsherd bed. “We Darlings use a system of provisional classification for when we don’t know what something’s originating species is. Animal Control uses the same system. They stole it from Darling when somebody broke class rules. We name these animals after the names people gave animals back when we thought the Earth was both flat and the center of the universe. We’re calling this fella and his ilk the prester. Does anyone know what a prester was purported to do back when books were made by flaying fields of cows? Any takers? No? Okay. It does this.”





She thumped the other cupboard door. It creaked open.

What fell from it reminded Essin of papers spilling from an overfilled locker until they saw a shape like a gnarled fingernail. It was a gnarled finger nail, and it was connected to a thumb that was connected to something like if a human body underwent the process by which wasps turn dead wood into paper nests. The corpse flaked. It bounced politely on the concrete floor and dissolved a bit down the middle.

“Bathroom’s that way if you want to puke. If you can’t deal with this, though, you aren’t going to be able to take what’s coming.” The group stayed pinned to their seats. Amelia rummaged through her pockets until she found a blue cigarette packet. She pulled out a dart, probed it between the cage bars until it touched the prester’s skin. It caught. She dragged and silver smoke joined the prester’s scenting the room.

The ninth-grader put up his hand.

“Put up your hand one more time and I’m using you for science,” said Amelia, flicking ashes onto the tissue-paper corpse.



“Sorry.”

“All good,” said Amelia. “But you’ll want to make sure you adapt quickly. What’s up?”

“What happened?”

“I told you. Somebody took notes. Not only that, but somebody passed those notes along to our colleagues in Information Control. And in spite of receiving my good advice on multiple occasions,” she coughed, something phlegmy stuck to the ribs. “Somebody didn’t expect consequences.”

She drew out the cage. The class shuddered. “If you just fuck up, nobody will kill you, but Darlings don’t take kindly to snitches. Okay, so today we’re going to be looking at the prester, how to avoid them, and how to treat their contact venom before it can do that to you. That being complete exsanguination. Soon as the venom hits your system your blood becomes an extension of the prester. Right now our best research indicates that this is part of its reproductive cycle. If anyone sees a blood chrysalis around, give me a shout — it used to belong to this guy and I’m researching prester imagos. Once they’ve touched you, you’re going to want to draw a cold bath and get yourself a lot of milk. Like, we’re talking multiple big jugs.”





Essin's nails scrambled to gain purchase on the brick that pulled with a gritty shuffle from the corner store's back wall. Inside a brass Buddha quietly presided over a heaped nickel congregation. The alley smelled strongly of pizzeria back room and garbage juice and the gravel was greasy behind the decrepit plaza. Lacie fished a dime from her pocket and set it in front of the Buddha and pulled out the folded field guide between two fingers. She opened it immediately. Essin's head darted to either end of the mall and then up at the rooftops over the hedge behind it but they didn't see either a new starling or anyone who might be an IC auditor, though it occurred to them that they might be monitored through some aperture under a window too small to see.

"It's about Presters," Lacie said.

"That was fast."

"They still don't know what it is. Listen to this:

"Presters: Standing theory is that they're a new snake, but God only knows what they were. My money's on a new tarantula, something that arrived in a crate of plantains. You



can see these mothers, zipping around like blazing pinballs. They never stop going, just keep moving, thundering around, quick as can be, steam frothing from the corners of their mouths. Unless you've caged the thing. Horizontal lines, friend, they can't make heads or tails of horizontal lines and are libidinously pulled to piles of shattered pottery so they're easy enough to trap in hamster cages. You don't even need to close the cage door! They won't run out. Too petrified. Don't let them touch you though. That contact venom's ugly as hell."

They were on their way out to a bridge over a ravine at the neighbourhood's edge and on their way down the couple stepped over piled human turds and a cat skeletonized by something that left its bones perfectly assembled. Amelia swung over the group like a dark moon in a clearing. While waiting for the class to assemble the hippy was flashing fistfuls of jellybeans at her then hiding them again. "Eighteen!" she shouted. They counted and the palm had, indeed, held eighteen jellybeans. "New bulldog ants. Your prize for surviving the sting is that you get good at sorting and numbers. Despite the continent's reputation, Australian new animals have so far been relatively benign."

If she was happy, it did not show in smiles. Essin felt as





though were they to see her smile they'd be faced with a grin composed of fish-hooks. Attending class made them feel adventurous. They couldn't shake the feeling you get when you wander off the trail in a forest, and too late you catch sight of a faded orange fluorescent PRIVATE PROPERTY sign and you have no idea how far you've drifted onto that property. For a moment blessed with illicit presence. Though in a sense their freedom was illegitimate, they held it being out of place. Lacie's taciturn period ended. She glowed again. Found new and subtle punishments for Essin. And they learned.

They learned the steps to dodge amphisboenas, which if you fucked it up, would instead induce the amphisboena to copulate with your sternum. They learned to improvise new hummingbird veils fast enough to prevent the new birds' phasing through you and scrambling your organs. They learned to detect a new rabbit variety #3 ambush from the way leaves around the new rabbits flipped to show their pale bottoms like they did before a rainstorm.

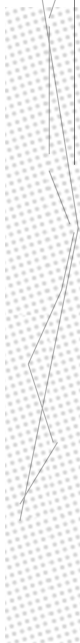
And they found another batch of guides under a rock in the forest behind the sportsplex, a gray lump with pink rose quartz exposed to the air. Lacie secreted it a pocket she'd sewn between her pants and legs and read it to Essin



in the basement:

"The old pet trade's going to fuck us all! Can you even picture the diaspora the new will have? No chaos like maximum chaos. Anyhoo, the fanged new leopard geckos have only recently escaped from breeder terrariums. Their perfume causes the brain to invert perspective, so corners that seemed close are actually far away, and vice versa. They exploit the confusion this causes to attack the veins in your ankles (when they're charging you it'll look like they're fleeing) where they'll attach themselves like leeches and then try to extrude themselves under your skin. This is benign but the resulting exposure to the new gecko perfume causes a permanent inversion of perspective. It's pretty nifty if you're trying to throw someone off. I keep a jar in my backpack to keep the fuzz off my tail."

Essin wasn't sure why but Lacie's readings made the basement feel like a woodland. They expected to hear tumbling leaves and smell electric autumn petrichor through wood living and decayed. As their eyes wavered shut at sleep's edge imagination expanded over wet-warped paperbacks, dated electronics, mildewy scrap lumber. Lacie fucked them in the half-finished bathroom in the corner with its tiny shower stall. They were crammed with the landlord's





junk, and all the old brown things Essin had been able to afford at the Sally Anne. They tacked their pages of doodles from the government classes to the boxes, squirreled snacks in old furniture, hung their clothes from curtains on pipes and wires and strings so that you had to part your way through shirts and jeans and underwear to reach the bed. Lacie liked to leave the window open and now and then cats hopped into the window well to mowl and press their toes to the screen.

In the early morning when their ears were near the wall, the landlord's somnambulant diatribes pulled Essin from sleep. He launched into lengthy trenchant arguments with the people in his head, but sometimes he shouted like he'd shout at an unruly pet, "Get off of that! Stop it! Shoo! Shoo!" He patrolled the house, his journey logged in creaks and thumps on the overhead floor until shouting didn't work and he threw plates and cups and beer bottles, screeching.

"He should buy plastic plates," Lacie said.

They were late to class.



Amelia's knife hit the lintel over their head hard enough to embed the blade to the hilt. She'd occupied a half-constructed house in a new development at the suburb's fringe. It smelled very strongly like a hardware store.

"Be on time!" she said, "New rule."

Lacie yanked the knife from the wood and passed it to Amelia before finding her seat. Amelia grasped the handle with the lightness and gentle dexterity a paintbrush felt in the hands of a Dutch master. She passed out papers and jars holding new aphids. The class began its practicum drawing new aphid colophons. They tipped the pinky-big lard-colored lumps onto their pages and began frantically scribbling. Amelia stalked the class, checking peoples' work.

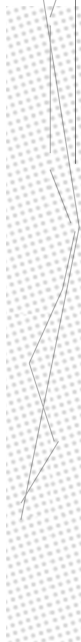
"We covered this last week. There's only one thing you have to do. What's the one thing?"

"Remember," said the kid.

"Do you want be sucked into a new aphid singularity?"

"No."

"Then stop fucking around and use your fucking heads."





Don't forget your stroke order! It needs to be precise."

Their new aphid was sniffing Essin's sheet where the ink bled across the pulp. The sharpie quaked, trembled in their fingers. They watched the new insect. It was split with a narrow hip down the middle like a dumb-bell and its eyes were unreadable glittering flakes. A pore opened in its side and a branching tongue flowed onto Essin's lines. They dwelled on Darling: The new aphid feeds by sudden and explosive matter integration. They briefly become a singularity. Now I'm not a new physicist, but I do know having a black hole erupt in your face will turn you to noodles and I've never met a person in my life who could survive being turned into noodles.

The old body builder's breath was heaving and sweat pooled in the wrinkles on his brow.

"No. Like this." Amelia spoke gently, leaned over his shoulder, took his sharpie, "You're writing. Not drawing. Right to left. Bottom to top. Don't think of it like a picture, think of it like a letter." She rose, kept patrolling.

New aphids are intensely covetous of certain asymbolic patterns we deduced by trial and error. Well, we think it has symbolic significance to new aphids, but in any case



these colophons, drawn in any medium, on any surface, as long as they are legible, will

“Wait ” Amelia turned to the old guy, “No, you were supposed to continue, not replicate! Get a fresh sheet, quick and ”

He looked up, eyes the eyes of someone who has done nothing wrong but hears someone yelling in the distance and isn't sure if they've yelled his name or just a name that sounds like his when yelled from far away.

The room roared. Silver light blanked all alternative perception. And ended.

“Keep writing!” Amelia yelled, “And remember what you're told in class! Christ.” The old body builder thrashed on the floor like his bones were chained to fifteen trucks driving in fifteen directions. From his right shoulder to his hand the arm had been turned to vermicelli. It was pink near the mulched bone and grayish-blackish precipitate where the long threads fanned around the new aphid. His face magenta and he winced so hard a front tooth chipped with an audible snap, the fragment striking a wall and skittering along the floor to land on Essin's sheet.





Amelia stood over him. Her hand was clapped to her face, thumb brushing the thin fuzz on her upper lip as she pondered.

After a while she loosed a sigh and lowered her hand.

“Well,” she said, “This is what we in the biz call an information hazard.”

His eyes were open and glassy and seemed to wrestle with what she said as though they couldn’t make heads or tails of fundamental sense. She clucked, sucked air through her teeth.

“Guys,” she said, “You need to be careful, ok?” And knelt by his side, yanking off her own shirts and knotting them into pillows under his head. The tattoos did spread over her body, a full tessellation of the power-brained new ants, and even swept down and vanished under her belt’s meridian. She didn’t have a bra on. Her stomach tats gave way for huge scars on her gut Essin thought were like forested fault lines where you might find a frog species that exists nowhere else on Earth.

“All right. Now typically I’d just say we’ll find a place to dump you near some new aphids where somebody will



find you but as everyone has just witnessed their singularities are difficult to miss. That's the kind of detail Information Control always catches. So good news is you aren't going to die in an IC closet, bad news is we're going to have to scramble your arm again." She fished around in her pocket, pulled out a fat pink pill pinched between two fingers. He struggled up on his free elbow to open his mouth while she offered the lozenge. "You'll have to dry swallow this, but it'll make the pain go away." She pressed it into his mouth, then abruptly clapped her hand on his chin, holding it shut. He spasmed. Struggled to open his mouth. His noodles flailed and he went bug eyed, then limp. His eyes still fixed on the ceiling. She closed them.

She looked over her class. The stares.

"Oh don't worry. He's still alive," she said. "Lucky guy. If his chest had been half a foot closer the new aphid would've spaghettiified his whole torso. But his memory will be completely glitched out." With a few quick strokes on the page she pacified his new aphid and re-jarred it. And then returned to doing her rounds, inspecting the class's colophons.

She stooped over Essin to flick away the tooth chip. "You're lucky too. This stroke's in the wrong place. Your



guy seems mostly curious about it.”

She checked Lacie’s. “Good form. Don’t fuck it up.”

Charles Darling’s Friendly Field Guides took no specific genre: some were broadsides, some were just newsletters, sometimes they were written in photocopied pages from kids’ books with letters blotted out. Some delivery jockeys had the chutzpah to stick them under windshield wipers or tuck them behind ads for chakra workshops on the community bulletin boards at fast food restaurants, which is where Essin often found theirs.

The hunt for homework materials drove Lacie and Essin outside the house, alone or together as their shifts allowed. They walked. The summer skies fermented to sludgy thunderstorms that lashed the city with slimy winds. Hats blew away, torrential rain tumbled pebbles down sloping driveways. Their shoes soaked. They sweated through clothes in incredible heat. This lasted for weeks, then passed as July at last bellied out into August. In the early evening the neighbourhood parents and retirees sat with beers and cigarettes on their lawn chairs and porch rockers, chatting, smiling, supervising children that biked and ran up and



down the streets firing toy guns and swinging nerf swords and forcing each other's faces into the lawn under the low-hung clouds painted pink and green by the lurid sunset. Adults rested their hands on rifles and flame-throwers, heads twitching alert when an unexpected silence rippled through the rhythm of the hissing leaves or pulsing garden insects. Very nervous parents never took their eyes from the clouds, because the peach-pink and mauve sky of early sunset was the perfect camouflage for new cardinals, a lesson the neighbourhood had learned from a rash of vanishing backyard dogs.

Gunshots as the sky grew dark testified to distant violence. Adults ordered their kids inside. Animal Control emerged from its fortplexes. Amelia had said those things stretched underground like termitaries, that the reason you never saw anyone go in or out was they used hidden exits and entrances in a vast network that spread under the whole city: the mycelium — a word sometimes heard shaking on the wind near where

The controllers appeared. They stood at the corners, in the parking lots, walking leisurely in pairs or small groups down clotted streets, clad in heavy boots, black armour, and rubber kilts, toting high-calibre hollow-core-bul-





let spitting rifles repurposed from foreign wars. As the last children retreated indoors and blinds snapped shut against the dying light, now and then Controllers stopped to wave.

Essin thought a lot about their hideous masks

It hurt to dwell on. And they touched the thought. It reminded them of. And. Just after. In middle school.

silver and shaped to anatomically-exact human skulls. Each was moulded from steel that Animal Controllers etched with a running tally of their kills. Swiveling multi-lensed electric goggles juttred from their sockets like a chameleon's roving eyes. Each dusk cued their nightly Halloween. The dark hours belonged to them, like in the past it belonged to ghosts and wolves and criminals.

As their field work ended Lacie and Essin snuck over to the narrow patch of ragged forest where they'd spent their first night together. Essin remembered the year before, gathering in this place with covens of other high schoolers to whisper over weed and mickeys. Lacie pulled them down below the nettles in the gully by the football field. She put her hand on their neck and her fingers in their mouth and afterwards they'd slept outside until morning.



Essin hoped to wake up with mosquito bites. They'd itch, reminding them of the night as they ground out drive thru orders.

Lacie put itching cream on her bites while Essin dressed for Starbucks.

And a night arrived when as Essin brushed against dreaming Animal Controllers came crashing through the bushes.

At least a dozen stood over them. By a faint yellow light cast from the backyards nearest to the woods, each tooth on each mask gleamed. They spoke in one voice, robotically garbled, pitched high and low, interspersed with clicks and whistles, sentence swapping back and forth between speakers as though they represented some cyberpunk bullshit version of an old Greek chorus:

"Curfew violation."

"Six zero seven. Notified."

"How old are you?"

"Eight zero four one curfew violation investigation in effect."





"Owl Pellet six zero six one five investigation confirmed."

"We asked how old are you kids?"

"We have three new raccoons at two hundred meters and closing."

"Cephalon confirms. Commence reinforcement after curfew violation investigation is concluded."

"Please confirm your age?"

"Sixteen," Lacie said. Amelia had said controllers went easier on minors when the kid asked about the penalties he'd face if caught going to class.

"Curfew violation."

"Owl Pellet six zero six one five. Minors."

"De-escalating. Reprioritizing. Reinforcement imminent."

"You kids using protection?"

Amelia said their mask's sophisticated lenses could easily see through flesh on higher settings. It seemed to Essin as though the controllers watched their innards, secret hormones and enzymes rushing from one place to another



beneath their skins.

The class debated names. They weren't allowed to use their real names and Amelia was opposed but caved, eventually, on the condition that everyone only used code names. The old gay couple went by Gris and May.

Amelia warned, "If those names have any poetic significance or personal references to you IC will have no trouble sniffing it out and you can expect consequences if they do."

"It doesn't mean anything," Gris said. "Just names we liked."

"Good. All right "

They were quiet but diligent, they didn't have too many questions but May was skilled and Gris somehow stayed more or less cheerful even up to her elbows in a new boar's squirming guts or when Amelia was waving around a human skull studded with new ladybug polyps explaining the new bugs' baroque reproductive cycle.

Then one day Gris walked in. Her face was gray, bags





sagged under her eyes and she smelled like clothes that have been worn nonstop for a week. May walked in after. And something walked in after them: furred, a pair of pink, bulging eyes huge as those goldfish so fancy their eyes often popped when scraped against aquarium walls. They were fixed on May and as soon as she settled down the gremlin began probing and sniffing around her thigh and attempting to scramble up her body, attempts she batted away with a limp hand the gnome dodged without much trouble. She was dead-eyed and vexed.

“Ah, class,” Amelia said, striding over to them, “Today’s plan was to talk about new newts and are they something but it looks like an object lesson just walked into class. This here is a new groundhog. If one of these mothers makes eye contact with you which they will try very hard to do it’s too late to help. You’re bound. There’s nothing you can do. It will follow you forever. Until it dies or you die, the new groundhog will spend all its energies trying always and as hard as it can to breath directly on your face.

“As far as we’ve been able to tell, the new groundhog feeds on the discomfort caused by its creepiness. You become bound by looking it in the eye. Even if you look at the eyes



in a photograph or a video, if the groundhog isn't bound to someone already, it will find you and stare at you with these swollen, unblinking walleyes, and breathe on your face whenever it can. You'll note that they universally have a severe case of halitosis — come here. Don't worry, it's bound to May. Give it a good whiff — like garbage juice in a heatwave. See, there's an incentive to pay attention in class if ever there was one.

"You'll note the new groundhog never blinks. It never looks away. It will always find a way to be in the same room that you are. It can squeeze through any crack. Your door might be closed and locked, the window might be shut and the blinds drawn, you might be on a cruise ship or an airplane or on the International Space Station or seven miles underground in a concrete bunker behind twelve code-locked titanium doors guarded by explosive landmines, but the new groundhog will figure out a way to be there, as close to you as possible, staring at you, breathing in your mouth."

She waved her hand between it and May and the new groundhog manoeuvred frantic around Amelia's fingers to keep staring.

"They don't sleep. They don't get tired. And whatever you





do, don't kill this creepy bastard. Go to therapy, cover your eyes, get used to that smell. But. Do. Not. Kill. It. That's most of what you need to know. You can find a more detailed guide to their physiology and the really fascinating microfauna in their gizzard responsible for that reeking breath in Darling's field guides. Now "

And they returned to class, glancing now and then at the new groundhog, which found a perch on May's shoulder as soon as she gave up and was breathing onto her cheek.

The next class Gris walked in, even more exhausted, and May lurched in after. Thirteen new groundhogs came scrambling in a parade behind them, fighting one another for the best vantage point from which to watch May.

"Oh for Christ," said Amelia. "You killed it, didn't you?"

"I didn't mean to," said Gris, "I thought I'd just hit it with a golf club. Just injure it."

"Why did you kill it? I told you not to kill it. You need to listen to what I say."

One class was set in a storage unit in a warehouse down-



town and Essin was cutting open a new rabbit's micro-wave organ with a paring knife. They had a sudden, ultra-vivid sensory memory of the reeking formaldehyde they'd smelled dissecting foetal pigs in high school, of the perfume of the girl in their group who wanted to be a nurse and how they felt vaguely horny for the muscular twink who was a dancer. They'd cut out the unborn pig's testicles, unwound and measured the intestines, held its jellied brains with their latex gloves. Essin compared what they found then to the New Animal components arranged in ways that were unrecognizable in relation to anatomy as they understood it. Many had mechanical components and organs that resembled computer chips, complete with fine conducting ribbons and capacitors. Other structures were regular geometrical solids – the new damselfly family had silicon icosahedrons buried in their spinal lattice.

What nudged Essin's thoughts, the thing that pierced all other perplexity, was that Amelia began discussing the edibility of new animals.

She started butchery courses. The knife she used for dissection and intimidation became a knife used for disassembling new animals and pointing to which parts they could eat.





“If you swallow bits of a new animal willy-nilly, it’ll eat through you like a hot coal through ice. But there are a few organs or muscle groups or tissues that aren’t so corrosive, and if you’re really in doubt, the marrow is almost always safe. Almost.”

(Curled up on the bed while galaxies filled their eyes again. In those moments they saw their knowledge swirling the fucked-up illogical guts of the news, colophons and veils, cloying formaldehyde, purple fascia and paring knives embedded in basement drywall, those tattooed arms so like a carny’s that somehow kept all that juggled knowledge airborne. Typhoons struck the museum in Essin’s skull. Why eat new animals?)

Amelia had brought half a dozen plastic grocery bags full of pill bottles and gave them to everyone. They were all labelled as antidepressants. “We’ll be starting your supplements. The changes will in part be physiological but you can expect to see psychological side-effects as well.”

The pills caused cramps. Essin puked the first three nights. After a while the pills made them shit these blue and pink jelly marbles that left the toilet smelling like rosewater. At work Essin ran to and from the washroom so often that their boss sent them home early.



And then the dream. It was a single dream, Essin and Lacie both had it:

You approach a campfire in the woods. It's surrounded by chimera-people, amalgamations of all the different lovers you've had and all the people you've wanted to love but haven't and even sometimes people you ogled from afar, drawn from throughout your whole life. A person with many arms and legs, men with breasts and extra eyes growing from their scalp, usually one or two people with genitalia instead of faces. They were telling stories to each other, and they invited you to listen, because the stories were about you. They weren't fabliaux, though. They were epics. Your odysseys and iliads, amazing stories about your acts in life. You spent the entire dream listening to these stories, a chimaera periodically rising to feed a log to the blaze. Attempts to interject or ask questions were shushed. And though you listened closely, and though on waking you could recollect how the stories felt, the dreams' details melted with the morning, leaving only sensations, like a vacation in a distant childhood. You only knew that, for a time, back then, you went to a different place.

The dream struck eight or nine times in a week. It was





infuriating. Essin tried to jot down what they heard in the dimness with a notebook they left open, to try to pin its poetry, but their pen hovered over the grid paper and never made a mark.

“What about the new coyote?” it was the kid, he’d put his hand up at the class’s end.

“The new what?”

“Coyote,” he said. “I was doing some research and I heard well, like, is it true?”

“It is,” said Amelia.

“About the mazes too?” he said.

“I’d rather not discuss it.”

“So it is true?”

“We aren’t discussing this further. I’ve been there and I don’t want to talk about it. Just avoid the shit out of them.”



Yetis swamped the Muskokas and massacred tourists. The yeti became a quick favourite among the new animal stan community, there were stuffed animals and t-shirts, and Animal Control had a new classification prepared, a new division ready to roll out, until someone shot a yeti and it turned out the creatures were just ordinary flesh chameleons that had fed on albino gorillas.

In a malt factory abandoned for sixty years the basement still stank like yeast. Light from studio lamps hooked up to a generator glowed on decrepit walls. Amelia explained the flesh chameleon thing. She had a juvenile in a bottle, tiny springs and gristle gears pulsing beneath milky and translucent skin. It slipped its palps over a chicken nugget and chewed it in its crablike mouth. Within a few minutes the chameleon had become something like a toddler's plasticine approximation of a chicken.

"Give it another hour and this thing will be indistinguishable from the real deal, an actual chicken." The class looked doubtful — it had too many legs and wattles were proliferating on its neck. Amelia watched it lovingly.

Then Amelia entered the room, carrying a crowbar. "Motherfucker."





“What the fuck?” said Amelia, backing away. “Hey, class, she’s —” But the second Amelia bellowed with berserker fury and ran across the room with the crowbar raised and brought it down, her whole body swinging to plunge the wedge into the first Amelia’s skull with thwaps like a hammer landing in a cantaloupe. Where the first Amelia’s body broke, springs and gristle gears dribbled out along with yellowish transparent blood.

Amelia stood, panting, over the ruined other Amelia.

“Okay, class. So — Wait, just a sec,” she wiped her brow, discarded the crowbar with a metallic clatter on the concrete floor, and pawed through the murdered mimic’s clothes, muttering, “Motherfucking lighter swiping fucker — ah ha!” Pulled out a cigarette and struggled with the lighter she’d found in her duplicate’s pocket for a while before it caught. She leaned against the wall. Smoke oozed from her lungs. “This is what happens when a flesh chameleon gets a hold of a human toenail. They are, indeed, clever enough to lock you in a closet, as it turns out. Who knew? Well, we aren’t entirely clear on how they pick up your behaviours and mannerisms and everything you know, but hey. They do. Lucky us, they don’t have an agenda other than usual animal stuff, mating, eating, surviving,



but there's no telling how many people are actually flesh chameleons. Funny thing with this guy is that they're a sub-variety of new leopard frogs. Go figure."

She flicked her butt onto the dead fake Amelia. Spat.

"Look, most people are in denial about this stuff and I don't mean the new animal truthers. Just write them off. You won't convince them of shit. A new animal is not like an animal. It's not a pest or a spectacle or a kettle-farmed meat container. You can't just throw it out, you can't just call the exterminators. Animal Control is an oxymoron. The new grizzly bear could reduce the most bloodthirsty Blackwater babyfucker to a weeping child with its gift of atonement. A new walrus could generate a glacier through its relentless, snowy resolve. The new grasshopper builds six-story stone cairns on any darkish surface it encounters and might well make highway travel impossible. Sure, we have bombs, we have industrial slaughterhouses, bulldozers, backhoes, greenhouse-gas-gushing foundries, guns, chemical spills, flamethrowers, rocket launchers, harpoons, poaching, introduced species, and dynamite. But we don't control the animals. We can't control the animals. We'll never control the animals. You must overcome your disbelief.



“Do you know what disbelief is? It’s you. You are disbelief, that thing you’re all holding near the core of yourself, that still thinks you’re walking home in the same neighbourhood, that the sky is the same sky, that those birds on the lines are the same birds just reskinned to look weird and some other bastard than yourself is going to be the one who gets their brain ossified by a new woodpecker. Listen: we adapt or we dinosaur. We do it now, or we’ll never get the chance. Humans are total fucking shit at convincing themselves to believe in looming, distant facts, unless, that is, they know they’ll be saved. Then it becomes all you think about. The only way for you to believe is for you to know that you can save yourselves from whatever comes next.”

Another prop had stood behind her on the folding table next to the flesh chameleon’s jar that night. A terrarium, dirt bottom just visible through the glass, a yellow towel over top of it. A faint scurrying sound, like chinchillas taking dust baths, came from inside.

“Professor Darling’s lessons,” she continued, “Are like nature itself. The facts may offend any notion of sense you had about the world but there’s a reality at its core you have to accept. What you know already is your enemy



when it comes to things like this. Some of you might be thinking by now that this is a scam, or a ponzi scheme. After all, what have you learned? How to cut a few things open. Which bits are edible if you boil them for a day and a half. A couple survival tricks that you know in your heart of hearts won't save you from what's coming. You're skeptical. I hope you're skeptical. It would be stupid not to be. The stuff you've prepared to find and eat are the least toxic parts of the animals. You'll be able to eat them for years without the animal killing you. It's possible that your body will adapt entirely, especially if you keep taking your supplements." At this point, she set a hand on the terrarium, tapping the cloth with her fingers. "A few of you will have skipped ahead and had the thought, 'Well, if we can't eat the new animals, why don't we just go vegetarian?'"

At which point she tore the towel from the terrarium.

The thing inside was like a thistle. Twitching prickly parts like stick insect legs sifted through a sandy substrate. A flower-- it gave the impression of an eye if an eye were pressed into the shape of a rose -- swiveled at its peak to look at the class.

"What's this?" she said.





There was silence.

“A new plant?” said the kid.

“Bingo. Its leaves are coated in cnidocytes—that’s jellyfish stingers for those of you who’ve been slouching on your field guides. Brush a leaf, and it’ll launch needles right through your skin. You’ll drop whatever you’re doing to start humming lullabies to it. Enough of a dose, and that’s all you’ll do. You won’t eat. You won’t drink. You won’t sleep. You won’t get up to go to the bathroom. If you’re lucky, someone will rescue you, but even if that happens, the withdrawal symptoms result in a permanent condition similar to late-stage Parkinson’s.”

Essin felt a pin in their neck. They swallowed. They nudged their hand towards Lacie’s but didn’t move it further when her finger didn’t shift.

“What kind of new is it?” said Lacie.

“It’s a dandelion,” said Amelia, “A new dandelion. Lucky us—a genetically-modified subspecies existing on only one Monsanto experimental farm in the United Dakotas Special Economic Zone. It hasn’t spread to all kinds of dandelions. Word is, new potatoes, new tomatoes, and new



plantains have appeared on the heirloom farms. We don't know much now, and we won't know much for a bit, but aside from any abilities they might have, new plant flesh is as toxic to humans as the flesh of new animals. Sometimes more."

She stretched her arms up. Stretched her neck from one side to the other and back. "I really wanted to continue classes you know. Even though you're a bunch of fuck-ups, you're doing okay enough to maybe not die when the time comes. That said, I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut your education short. Use your heads, and you'll be fine."

"What?" said Gris.

She'd been showing up alone to classes for weeks.

"I just said to use your fucking head," said Amelia. When it was clear nobody understood, she sighed. "My dop-pelgänger wasn't as fastidiously stealthy when sneaking through the neighbourhood as I am. We're busted."

Machines whined on distant doors upstairs. Sparks crackled as saws shrieked on steel.

"I'm going to buy everyone some time," Amelia fished





some kerosene from her bag, lifted the lid from the terrarium and doused the new dandelion. She pulled out a matchbook. Lit a match. Dropped it on the bug-plant-thing which scrambled and tried to uproot itself to get away from the fire.

“What about you?”

“What about me? Head out that way and make sure you disperse fast once you’re outside. They’re just after me and the plant but they’ll take any of you if they can. If you get nabbed, well. Expect consequences.”

The new dandelion was scrabbling up its terrarium walls, but couldn’t find purchase. Its little claws slipped. It fell weaker as fire chewed its leaves. Boots thumped on the half-rotten wooden steps down to the factory basement. Amelia grinned and grit her teeth.

“Run, fuckwits!” she shouted.

And the group was running, filing up the steps she’d indicated. But Essin was last and they looked back and saw her.

She peeled off her shirt and stripped off her pants and she



stood nude as a snake in a fresh skin. The new ant tattoos ran straight down to her ankles, wrapped a buttock, covered every part of her from the neck down but her hands.

And the tattoos opened. Their edges peeled up as though each was a scale yanked away by some rough wind. And Essin saw they weren't just tattoos. They were hatchets, flush with the skin, and as each flapped up insects flooded out—huge-brained, winged, tottering, a writhing swarm that dripped from her body so she became dressed in incredible, stinging sand: her new ants a robe spreading across the floor.

"Pretty cool, right?" she shouted to Essin. "Last lesson for the road. Symbiosis trumps predation. Now get the fuck out of here."

Rams thumped on a far door. It opened with a bang. Animal Controllers drove in, guns up, swarm rising to meet them and them swatting away and shooting their guns with terrific booms into the new ants that flooded the basement, as the new dandelion squealed and smoke and new insects swaddled the room in unanimous writhing gray.





In their last year in high school insomnia captured Essin's nights. It usurped good sleep with whirling thoughts and because such fears were new to them, they hadn't given them a name, hooked them to reality, and speculated while unsure how to cope with the products of their own speculations. One thought erupted from the others: What if somebody were to dream forever?

They didn't mean this as a playground philosopher's, "What is real?" question that leads to teenagers rediscovering solipsism. They meant something more like, if someone made the conscious decision to dream forever, would they be morally culpable?

And the question came back when their classes ended. The malt factory burned. Its black smoke soared over the neighbourhood, bellowing from holes in the concrete walls and collapsing what was left of its corrugated roofs. Amelia was gone and with it their path to knowing how to live through tomorrow.

Would humanity be culpable if they all gave up to dream at the same time, if it would get the species out of a mess like that? It wasn't inconceivable. Everyone could all escape, and in the time between when they started dreaming and when they starved to death they could lead something



strange and short, something intense and perfect, without
the numbing dullnesses, fear's long laudanum.

Would that be wrong?

Would that be the wrong thing to do?

Would it be wrong to the people who loved you?

Would it be wrong to the planet that brought you into
being?

Could they have asked their mother this question, and if
she understood it, how would she have answered?





Addendum:

A few classes earlier they'd gone over new June bug riddles which could be used to shepherd the neobeetles, which projected screens of darkness and as such were practical for hiding from Controllers.

"Stay after class." Amelia said, as she was ripping parts from a computer and running a silver pill-shaped magnet over the chips to scramble the class materials. She'd explained it was used originally to fish metal from cow guts. "You two."

She gestured to Essin and Lacie with the magnet.

The classroom had emptied and it was a class room that week. Amelia'd broken into a half-abandoned technical high school that had become a whatever center when the neighbourhood's young population had faded. It yawned. Its halls were huge, empty, gray. When the room cleared Amelia said, "Do you two remember Sunny Sunday?"

"Not clearly," said Lacie, sitting up on a desk. "A teacher came into our class to let everyone know why their phones wouldn't work. I think that was the last time I had a cell phone. The TV wasn't working when I got home.



They had to wheel in white boards to do the teaching for the rest of the year and we learned math and shit from the terrible drawings all the teachers made. It was like they'd never held a pen before."

"I thought," Amelia looked up to the tiled particle board ceiling that Essin had spent their school years glancing up at and seeing patterns in (though they never saw patterns in the clouds): faces, wild dogs, grinning lizards. "I thought of it like a lash from the sun, punishing us for our dependence on its light."

"Yeah," said Lacie, "It'd make sense to see it that way."

"The sky itself was a hostile thing," she said, "I remember coming home and people still looked forward to cloudy days and rain. They just felt more comfortable and predictable. But it's stupid, like children hoping to hide from monsters under blankets, as though blankets could deter monster talons. I still prefer rainy days."

"Yeah," Lacie's voice was breathy, shrinking, "I remember that too."

"Everything we'd been told was our important accomplishments for a century was wiped away by solar dynamite."





"We didn't even have radios for like three months."

"I thought it was four."

She was done smiting reason from the computer's guts. It was an outrageous thing to do, kill an old computer. Perhaps that's why she thought of it. She put down her magnet. When she crossed the room it was with strides, the strange interdependence of her schlubby appearance, her zits, trashy haircut, and require efficiency jolted something in Essin's groin. A confidence uncut by geeky goofiness submerged all spiking doubts.

Amelia set her hand on Lacie's cheek.

Lacie's breath sounded audible though Essin stood halfway across the room. Her tongue touched the teacher's index finger where it rested by her lower lip and Amelia gently twisted her hand to slip index middle ring between Lacie's teeth. Her neck crooked back. Eyes almost closed save for whites still clear in lower crescents. Vowels vaguely meandered from inside her.

Amelia's kiss was forceful. Essin had slumped on the floor and watched with their hands limp on either side of their thighs at first then knotting quickly in their clothes.



Fingers frantic. Kneading. Lacie was supported entirely it seemed by Amelia's pressing against her. When she drew back from her kisses (lip trailing for a moment pinched in Amelia's teeth) she seemed to scrutinize Lacie's face like a lepidopterist manipulating a flayed moth on a slide to get a better angle at its organs. Lacie was clawing her shirt. Amelia sunk a thumb into her throat and she pulled up at the tee with the layered long sleeved shirt underneath and their teacher shucked her top entirely.

The tattoo glowed. Its rigid tessellation like a detailed leaf-bed, its regimented creatures shuddering with the movement of the muscles underneath them. Essin smiled. The word blessing repeated like this: blessing blessing blessing blessing blessing in their skull in a way that hopped and looped like insects darning the air over a meadow's tall clovers.

They saw in the half-dark room the fluorescents clarified where a new ant tile was punctured by a mole on Amelia's back and where their lines were squashed by Lacie trying to put as much breast into her mouth as possible. Nothing seemed lost about Amelia. No words or moans or whispers came from her. She hooked a hand down into Lacie's pants and worked there for a while, and after a while





undid her belt the tattoos ranged down her buttock, tessellation spreading down thighs and wreathing a cock that bent just slightly to the side and fucked Lacie on the desk while her fingers clawed at the pried back: spine, ribs, skin-sheathed scapula all shifting the colors under them while Essin's hands fell still.

"You're funny."

They were walking home. Night had fallen and with it rose cricket song from suburbia chittering summer bats swam through the humid night. Lacie slipped a hand into Essin's butt cheek pocket.

"You really liked that didn't you?"

Essin grinned. They knew it was big and uncontrollable and felt a touched embarrassed but also realized they didn't need to.

"She was weird. She just sort of stopped around when I'd had too much. Like, I don't know if that was about her or about me."

Four gunshots sounded far off, then five, then machine gun rattle.



“New pillbug? Do you think?”

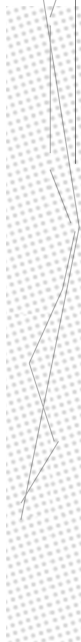
“Waxing gibbous,” said Essin, pointing up to the moon where it leaned pale on the balmy summer night. “They’ll all be underground.”

“Ah,” Lacie said. “You’re right.”

“It’s probably people,” said Essin.

“Shit,” said Lacie. And stopped to listen to the wind. But no more gunshots followed. “Do you want to stop at the corner store for ice cream?”

“Yeah,” said Essin. “That’s a good idea.”





Name: Elon Duraz Rao

Birthday: _____, 1999

Sex: Male

Occupation: full-time Vons Associate

Likes: open fields, Forgotten weapons, LoL, chilling with homies, louds then mids, game economics

Dislikes:: nothin'

Blood type: ____

Seen with: "i used to love going to concerts as a kid. for some reason, id kick and scream and ask my mom for money to buy a t-shirt even if i didn't care so much about the band. then i'd show it off to people at school, even though most people ignored me. there were a couple of people like me though, who were into it. i never really understood people who paid so much for clothes that didn't mean anything, except that they were expensive. what's the point? where's everyone going to so fast?"



by: [nekosattva](#)

2
LVCIG121
OET
TUCN2
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G10EBB4
COMWODQ
B1202
EVBV1D4
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RELEASE AS SANITIZED

In the _____, an unremarkable kid with a penchant for Soulfly and Nirvana t-shirts just finished high school. His yearbook quote reads, "I'm _____. Wow, 16 years old already. Time totally flies. I have no idea what comes next, or what I'll do when I graduate. I hope everything that is good in this short life comes to you guys."

_____ 23/17

After graduating he lives with his parents and spends his days delivering mail throughout the village and drinking on the weekends. A blog entry from _____ reads "Holy fuck, I'm bored! I've been staring out of the window for days with nobody passing. What a load of shit, I want some action, something to happen."

Eight years later, the kid _____ sports a bald head and long red beard. He wears a djellaba and looks into the camera with an empty intensity.

new posts



“Hi Dad, hi Mom. This is a personal message to you. This message means I am no longer in the _____. I have heeded the call of Allah, revealed in the Qur’an.”

_____ can you deal with this? 10/15

Amid the ruins of _____, the kid, who probably never met a Muslim his entire life growing up, explains how he discovered the Qur’an amid the media-frenzy around the far-right _____ campaign against immigration and Islam. He recalls a particular night, at a party, where he feels disgusted with all around him, wandering around drunk with a total lack of purpose or direction. How the suffocation of the village, the placid security it offered, and the endless cycle of meaningless repetition that gnawed at him started to fall away in the light of the shahada. Soon, a fire starts to burn inside him that leads him to make contact with radical jihadists. Isolated in his bedroom, in between his mail delivery rounds and the increasingly infrequent drinking, the internet opens the door to a world pregnant with meaning

and an intensity he had never encountered before. He starts devouring the works of Sayyid Qutb and severs all contact with his old friends. Finally, he boards a flight to Turkey and travels in secret to the Zone to meet up with operatives of either Jabha Al-Islamia or Jabhat Al-Nusra. In his last video message he mentions he never plans to come home. If he doesn't become a martyr in _____, if he will see the fall of Al-Assad and the foundation of the Caliphate, he will travel to Iraq to continue down the path of the sword. It is unclear whether the kid is still alive. After his last video message there has been complete radio silence. Whatever his fate, it seems he knows what to do now.

RELEASE AS SANITIZED Aug 23, 2020



Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



Last Time

another shift at the pizza joint for yelena, spending coins at the arcade where a click of the plastic trigger soon blends into the clatters of machinery from trucks entering into the desert as she searches for christine. welcome to the zone.



CW: war, disappearance, death, corpses, nudity, orphanage

What happens then?

I feel myself sprout in a rush of water. I splash onto the rocks, I spill I seep into the cracks. In the fire of heat, I am an outburst of steam. In the chill of nothing, I'm rigid like ice. I'm a vein, a way; I am a means, a vessel. I'm flat like a riverbed. I'm tall like a waterfall. I'm thick, like cotton but like sand to your touch We've always been two heads of the same dog. My thoughts have always felt incomplete; horrified when I found their end in you.

I reach for my neck. I find that where I expected the smooth, familiar softness thumps instead a coarse bundle of tendons & ligaments. I feel the monstrous, burdensome blood thicken. I am a beast, a machine.

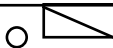
Where do you and I begin? Feel the seams between our bodies; the many colors of our flesh fucking.

UET
TUCN2
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U10EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EBV01D0
U11BICE2
22E
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1120W
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Dark crimson congealed in every crevice. Watered by the aqua vitae of Yangzi and Volga, roots like greedy fingers 'round a jewel. Our time has come. Plant a seed, see if these rivers don't run. Don't wander, lost in your doubts and confusions. I am here

Somehow I can't see what you see, yet I know I see it. Are we two sides of the same coin? Heads, tails; I win. I touch my own body, I feel your stomach rumble next to mine. We are starving. Raise your mighty sword, feel my hand guide yours to his loving head. I sense the tension under your skin

I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff

Our lips may never meet. Yet there's no question that I am you and you are me

We roam the cliffs of rye. Our four swords stained with blood. They hide there in the grasses, shaking along to the wind. Like the reaper, I collect the seeds row by row. The mud feels warm underneath my feet. I jump into the grasses and they scatter. Whine, screech like terrified mice.

There is a disk of fire crashing into the distant





field, far across the acres of rye. I see everything before me ablaze in beautiful amber flame. The wind blows and covers me in ash. I feel it burning in my lungs, dry skin crackling and crumbling. And they run into my arms.

Yelena felt a cold chill brush her ears, a terrified shiver dripping down down her spine as the warm ground melted beneath her like microwaved pudding on her lips. It felt like the comfort of childhood beds; it felt like a Sunday morning, a lazy afternoon with warm sunny hearts. In our heart of hearts, the sacred sanctuary, undisturbed by foreign parasites and spoiled, withering spawn that never bloomed. Unplundered, teenage loot sits unmo-
lested 'neath sweet smelling vines. What hand leads them to open as they do? These thoughts are the old skin that dries and falls away. Yelena holds her head in her palms; to feel its weight, to stall its flight and keep it tethered. These thoughts are a scab of dried blood. For the first time in her life, her stomach throbbed with a deep, pained desire to live. Fire shot into her limbs and singed the edges of her nerves as fever-pitched panic overtook her senses. Her legs spun, collapsing in mud, running without direction nor sense as she whined and cried in fear

She ran. From the sky fell pillars of smoke, white



like bleached bone. Branches crackled and shattered into a cloud of splinters, charred by flame. Dead leaves dissolved in violent winds rushing past the decaying trees, clinging to Yelena's body like a shroud, remnants of night through the burning clouds she ran to her destination, a haze of white. All rivers run too, and Yelena felt her body grow heavier, dragging behind her ever more corpse-like. In her thoughts painted with visions on milky white, a stray bomb dismembered her, cleaved her in two, decapitated, squashed & pulverized... every step surprised her with its existence, that dogged refusal of her life to cease as the entire world shrank into a single pixel dead-center... captured on grainy phosphor cam, reticle-trained and tan-go'd. "Shit," she thot to herself. "Shit," she repeats to herself. With her hearing decimated, there is only the sound of water nourishing the aching thump of her heart. She falls through a sheet of leaves and gravel buries her back; an early grave in mud tinged in the warmth of blood

A few flickers returned to her. Through the leaves, she spies light. She breathes in, she breathes in again, savoring the tremble of her lungs. With heat in her face, she rose from the grave like a jilted corpse. Dead is the sound of leaves rustling, and birds chirping, and crickets & bugs and nasty things fucking on the branches; instead



a flowing river of sine, unending. The fire had cleaned her of ghastly human do-up, revealing the machinic core whining hertz punctured only by her distant heartbeat that suggested an older life. She slapped the side of her head, hoping to shake off the noise. The blood oozing from several orifices seemed inappropriate now, she had no use for these illusions. She reached for her phone but found flesh instead. In a frenzy, she dropped to her knees and paddled 'thru the dead, burnt leaves. A couple of writhes, like a fish dancing itself to death... without her phone, her wretched circumstances finally dawned upon her. With the protective tether of great Mother's network severed, she was now alone in the languid dead forest. Wood was peeling off the trees, piercing dead birds with splinters. She was now alone, in this distant land that never seemed so large pinched between her fingers, with only her body. She wept, into her now useless hands. Dead, dead like a battery

Yelena woke up and traveled down the marshes, away from the energy-drink springs and styrofoam bunkers that formed a hallucinatory oasis pouring through her hands. In this desolate forest of dying trees, it scatters to the wind. Her hearing slowly returned, though the hum would not leave her. It was the network, buzzing & hum-



ming thru' neural pathways, speaking in a code she could not understand. The sun had risen higher since she'd last slept, and she'd torn off her Adidas jacket and hung it from her head like a cloak to shield herself. Mud caked unto her skin, giving her a self-impression of a misshapen creature fashioned out of clay. She hummed a song, 'tho she could only remember a hook, repeating, twisting upon itself: "and I know when that hotline bling..." a mantra that rescued her Ego, sent it home aboard a B-52. "That could only mean one thing;" the hot mud clinging to her skin as the night choked the day. Lost then as she was now, though she was sure there would be no rescue. She tried reaching for an optimistic thought but they all buzzed with fear, anxious that they might slip out of their borders and seep into impossibly steep cracks. She saw the shapes of Christine's reply, the little box of her message alive with tense animation and something like words; "I'm right here, bitch." A smiling face. A dagger. It felt like the opposite of loneliness somehow. It's a faint headache now

Further down, 'tween branches caught on jagged rocks, bones baking in the sun, crunchy grass trampled by foot-- Yelena saw tracks running down through the dirt, past foggy plastics & cigarettes. She peaked over leaves,





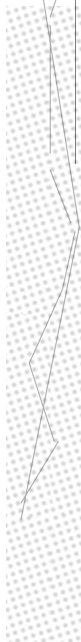
scanning the horizon; all noisy, squirming green. She felt like a hunted creature, a hare hopping thru' the farm, the sun a massive eye peek-aboo-ing through the glass and hot with pity as it gently robs her of daylight. She ran over the shanty road, passing through the shrouds of overgrown grass to hide herself. Beside her, underneath the canopy, she saw white tarps burdened with human shapes. The air smelled putrid, stench condensing onto her face, robbing her of any rights to be human. She felt beastly; a creature stalking amongst the dead. Would a car ride along and explode her head all over the moss & berries? She imagined herself becoming a mythical undead symbol, scared children running to their parents' bed to complain about her matted hair and cracked skin. She imagined them rising from the white tarps, teeth yellow in a smile

Further down the road, Yelena sees the bruised wood of village life. Broken windows swung, letting whistling dust pour out from the empty homes. Open suitcases, strewn about with spilled shirts and open dresses onto crumbling streets, some folded into clumps and others flat and limp. A lone fox drank at a puddle gathering beside a run-down little shop. A decaying piece of cardboard; a plastic face made pale by sunlight that eats at its edges. A few beer bottles rolled down the street. Yelena threw a




bottle at the fox, who ran off to hide under a beat-up little square car to watch it roll down into a drain. A power-line twitched nervously above her. She had yet to rejoin the land of the living. Her shoes squished beneath her, heavy and laden with drying mud. Bricks spun 'round her head; every minute, the wood and stone seemed to recombine into new houses. She saw herself in shiny, broken glass: disjointed, the smooth corners of her wholeness were now split into discrete parts that met nowhere. The name Yelena seemed to her now an appendix swollen with disease; cut it out, quick, undo yourself of this terrible burden the past forces upon you. She wiped away the warm mud from under her eyes. The sun sits on her skin, its warmth oozing into the disparate parts to make broken fragments whole

She tumbled from one sunken house to the next, trying to force herself through the front door. She could hear crickets, soaked wood crackling under her feet-- the town was devoid of anything, even the stubbornness of primitive living, as dead birds and rats swam in the pools of watery mud. Her stomach rumbled, the rumble traveled downward, pain radiating into her hips... a deep, pained desire to life. She saw a hatchet lying besides wood, still dry, freshly chopped. It sat before an old decrepit building, a hole blown into its black innards, with nothing left





to burn. She approached the hatchet and took it into her hand, and the thought of dismembering herself, of reducing herself down to the constituent parts throbbed into her mind. She pulled up her t-shirt and set the edge of the hatchet to her stomach. What would she name herself, this product of hers? Besides a few tools, a puppet dressed in a red headscarf and white cloth watched with black eyes. Her first subscriber. She faced the puppet and smiled, then made the smallest of cuts into her belly, just enough to draw a bit of blood. Yelena is now merely pieces, scattered like splinters and ash; feeling unburdened, she leaves the hatchet behind her



Past the blackened wooden fence, a house sat so inviting with its devastated windows & open doors. Mud had splattered onto the walls, seeming like earthly blood. The smell of turpentine loomed in the air. The floor was covered in trampled clothing, broken glass, beer dripping down from the ceiling. Squirming insects crowded in the kitchen, familial nests in the stillborn soups & crusty breads. Her stomach grumbled. She opened the drawers, the cabinets, scattering the sugar and salt and cutlery onto the ground. Cans of strange fish and depressed confectionery looked even stranger beside the bright colors of sprightly potato chips, space-age aluminum protecting



their undead supremacy. American foodstuffs, bestowed unto us by Nay-toe, could outlive any civilization made of fragile bone & wood. She finds a few cigarettes, stowed behind damp sugar cubes, and lights them on the stove. The packaging showed a cowboy, in mid toke, blowing smoke into the eyes of the entire world. Blessed Nay-toe; she takes, she gives. The burning is a raw display of force, a symbol of what must be done with the past. You can halt it no more than you can halt the smoke that enters the willing lungs of others, and hers too. It's the return of the past, asking to be repaid its debt. She coughs, hacks, throws up a little bit into the sink; a purge of some kind. She drops the cigarette onto the floor and reaches for the packaged plasticine foods: delirious twink-y chocolate-coated pastries, oozing white velvet that melts like cream, fluffy globules of airy sugar. She squeezes the tender spongy cake together with the chocolate, forming a congealed ball of syrup-shortening, and takes furious bites, one after another, gobbling up a thousand industrial-strength calories. Her stomach cried in agony; would her organism meld with the edible plastic, her person itself becoming imperishable goods? She left a trail of crumbs behind her as she stumbled to the fridge, in which everything was black with decay except for a colorful orange bottle of soda. She plugged & chugged the soda, feeling the gas well up in her



throat, leaving her feeling heavy like an ancient tree. It satisfied the hunger, but not the lack. The homogeneous orange liquid spilling from her lips civilized her, a shield against the deadly earth. She heaved herself from one room to the next; the dull white lace, the red checkerboard patterns, the stained wood. Beside the black metal stove, a few wrinkled pictures hung from the wall. There were children with teeth missing, an old woman disappearing in the background who smiles to the camera, an old passport photo with a middle-aged woman whose dirty blonde locks fell across her forehead. She looked frightened, as if it had been taken in service of some unknown purpose. She sees her own reflection take her place; wrinkles of skin and scars, etched into stone. She packed what was left of the shiny, sticky cakes into her pockets. She takes the pictures too; the paper feels comforting under her fingertips. She fantasizes about the middle-aged woman's escape, the children strapped onto the axle. She sees them running for the border, fire nipping at their feet, sailing down a river of blood and bleached bone.

“Tochna, khochesh eta dyelat?” he asked as he covered Yelena with the blanket and buried her under wooden crates. She wondered how many he'd smuggled in & out, his wallet a little less fat every time he passed a



military checkpoint. Nay-toe troops mostly turned a blind eye to the guns & ammo, chicks, and drugs back-forth-ing from the Zone, as long as they'd get first dibs anyway. She learned about this one from a haul vlog, showing off the spoils of a raid on a pharmaceutical factory. Coyote got to eat a little too. She hid in the gaps of a large cargo bed, carved enough just to hide a few people. "Da," she said. You've done it so many times before, what's so different now? She'd never thought that coyotes would have feelings of their own, their own boundaries and lines, no matter how arbitrary they'd seem. She'd hoped the dollars would override his guilt, his common sense. Every man has his price, and every woman too. She felt him open the door of the truck, his weight pulling her down with him. Had she gone too far? Every time her anxieties threatened to overwhelm her, she'd bite her finger 'till blood was drawn. At the airport, lying about her purpose to the border agent. Paying off the taxi driver. The mysterious Telegrams, Whatsapps... a trail of blood sometimes followed, draining her of that particular humour. The truck shook beneath her, and she pressed her arms up against the wood for some resemblance of stability. She thought of her mother, praying every minute to prolong the lie. She'd called before entering the Zone, using a phone-card to mask her location, making sure it was right before



her mother would come home from work. "I'm having so much fun here," biting her finger between every sentence. "Sometimes I get lonely, but I'm meeting lots of people." The truck stopped and she heard a guard ask why he was returning to the Zone. "Miss you. Miss you so much. Love you mom. Davai. Paka paka."

She watched as the sun rose up from the landscape, filling the plane's cabin with hot white heat. The pilot spoke in Russian, announcing that for security reasons they'd be interviewing people at the airport. She felt sleep creep up on her senses, but she never could sleep upright. On her phone, an old video of Christine... she was playing the violin, reliving through old lessons punctuated by embarrassed laughs. "I just can't," she said between giggles, before continuing onto the next bar of Sibelius. Yelena admired her most in these short, tender moments of ambition tempered by levity. She tried to swallow down some of her tears, but she felt them pour onto her hands. So exceedingly rare are these little instances of utopia, even though they're all that make living worthwhile. Yelena locked the phone and set away, trying to recover the memory of levity as the weight of her actions had set in. In pursuit of Christine, she paid the price of admission to the Zone; she is forever changed, never to close her eyes again



to the barbarity of man and the finality of a single artillery that exudes death in all its radius. From this moment on, anything not blood and harsh metal is merely temporary reprieve-- earned but never expected. By crossing into the perimeters of the Zone, she becomes a mutant, a sponge that sucks up the muck of its environment. Only now does she realize that even if Christine is alive, a part of Yelena dies here

I write this to you because I don't know who else to write it to. I don't really have friends. I don't even know if you're still there

Elon Rao. Last seen: 403d

My friend got into some trouble, I think. Chasing it, you know. Tired of typical 'yt' society. Tired of people pretending everything was OK. Everyone does it nowadays I guess. Maybe you've seen them talk about the good life out there. Maybe you seen them take selfies next to rotting corpses and burning cars. You know, they're calling them "war influencers" and shit like that. All that fake shit. Or maybe it's all real, I'm not sure. But Christine went too, and her thousands of followers came along. She's somewhere there in the Zone, not answering her DMs, not making any new content. I'm worried. Worried sick. I feel like



she's my responsibility. I dunno, I guess I always wished I had a sister. Or maybe it's something else.

I told my mother I'm going to the summer camp I always go to, this time as a volunteer. But actually, I took a plane to one of the countries next to the Zone. It doesn't matter where. Someone's reading this anyway. Following me around. I took a plane, then I'll take a bus, then someone will smuggle me back into the Zone. I speak the language, or at least the language it used to be. I'm gonna tell them I have family to visit, to look after, in one of the communities close to the border of the Zone. Shocking how easy it is, to find this when you want to. To walk into a war zone like this. A lot of kids do it this way. It's the only business for the locals who lost everything in the decades-long civil wars. These guys, in turbans or whatever, taking money from rich, spoiled brats with gold-plated guns that they recognized from Soldier's Creed, screaming clan tags as if invoking the power of some malevolent deity. Shit. Maybe that's where you are too. I've read about you in Telegram groups. I don't know what they see, what they think about you

What did I see? You were a normal kid. You had glasses, square shitty ones. Stubbles. Nothing to say, or do.



You had the same thoughts as anyone else. You went to the same events, talked about the same topics. You made the same statements, you clapped along. But inside of you, something started rotting away. Everything around you makes you feel isolated and alone. It starts small. Something bothers you, and you don't understand why. It's wrong, and everyone knows it's wrong but no-one cares. You don't understand why people are so careless, so heartless. You start to hate other people, for their hypocrisy, for their casual cruelty. You start to feel that the world is getting worse, even though you feel nothing for the past because it never existed for you anyway. It doesn't make sense, and it never starts to. You start to get tired, it wears you out. Before you even realize how hard you've fallen, you become an alien to everyone else. Somehow, it seems all so hard to put into words that don't make you want to kill yourself out of embarrassment.

I don't know if I'll make it out alive. To read your responses I mean. Maybe I'll end up like Christine. Or maybe I'll run out of money. Anyway, 'till next time

She walked out the front door, feeling more bored, agitated with every piece of chaff left by what was once a family. She followed the tattered path of torn grass, run-



ning beside the torn pipes and brown appliances rotting in the grass. In the back of the yard, a small garage made of rusting metal surrendered easy to a shovel stuck in a pile of clay. The insides were caked in a layer of neglectful dust, oil and rust, cannisters rolling freely and dripping into crevices. Underneath a rotting sheet, a rotund car sat embossed with the letters KAMAZ, its paint crackling and crevices white with webbing. She lets the sheet fall onto the sides, to reveal the rotting wooden cargo bed slowly breaking under the weight of a broken washing machine. She unlocks one of its doors through the open window, and heaves herself onto the seat beautiful decorated with a fraying red carpet. A plastic golden icon of Mary hung from the rear-view mirror. She reaches for the ignition, and sighs when she feels the cold metal of the keys. A few cranks; she grasps the steering wheel and fucks with the clutch, the gear stick... remembering the way she did it in Mayhem III, with the clutch down, releasing the pedal, button X and bumper L. The engine sputters, as if drowning on its own pain, begging for more liquid gold. Ah, the beast is yet hungry; in goes the blood of the land, the petrified spoils of the past, filling the garage with the excited stench of petroleum. She gives it another turn-- her callousness sends the truck lurching through the metal of the garage and into the wooden fence that scatters onto



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the mud. She shrieks, kicking the dashboard in desperation, trying to control the truck as it yawns into fence after fence... leaving a trail of jagged wood and paint in its wake. She brakes, then accelerates, the washing machine tumbles off the cargo bed and shatters a bus stop. Slowly the shriek turn to excited laughter; she stoops down to the steering wheel, her eyes trained on the descending road towards her as the truck sputters past the rotten barns, the dead horses and cows, gardens stripped of their fruits; even the ghosts have starved away. The smoke rises, growing in the mirrors and eating up the landscape like vicious cancer. Forward motion's the answer; don't get addicted to living or to being Yelena. Kick her like a sickening habit. It's all in Nay-toe's hands now

And it hung like an unfurled banner over the broken sides of a bunker. A stench foaming in the mouth, dripping down the throat. Nay-toe's meddling hands touched it all; look 'tween the bullet-riddled metal and wet cloth, the equipment left to petrify in the sun, camo-colored moss petrified on skin. She drove over their corpses, their bodies brittle like sand, spreading across the entire valley as the wind takes them. She stops the truck; the vomit flowing from her mouth was the only bright, living thing in the empty wasteland around her. They had been torched,





transformed into human-shaped charcoal briquette. In the cover of the fog of war, Nay-toe erases its mistakes. Their skin made anonymous, jagged and silvery; they were no longer individuals but a mass of atrocity. Each of them once had names, wives and children, and the smallest, most trivial desires set off 'till tomorrow. Or the next day. The day after that. The promise of tomorrow drips through the cracks of the window, a water-drop on the tip of the everyman's tongue who doggedly chase next evening's sundown for today's sunrise. And they'd find nothing. No, forget it; shut the blinds and doors. Don't let tomorrow in-- that mooch, liar, cheat. She feels neither pity, nor sorrow for tomorrows. She wipes away the vomit from her mouth and returns to the truck, humming a tune to mask the sound of crushing bone

Down beyond the valley, she spots a body of water. Her truck rams into a few trees, softly bringing her to a stop. Something like joy begins to irritate her senses. Down from the chalk-caked concrete, water rushes down the hill and splatters onto broken remnants of a bunker. Marshes hung 'neath splattered graffiti, punctuated by shell impacts. Tomorrow is already here, growing in the placid puddles. Yelena spills out of the truck, leaving behind a trail of gravel. A bee drank from a flower stuck



underneath the wheel. Like a bruised animal, she hobbled over to the edge of the water and stuck her fingers into the angry torrent. Cool, crisp to the touch; she cupped some of it and wiped her face. The murky water ran down her neck, bringing back to life the dry, encrusted stone her clothes had become. She shivered; she thought of ablution rituals, a surrender to the new by shedding the dried chaff of yesterdays. This is happening-- she presses her foot into a little worm, it twitches then contracts into a fleshy spiral. A little pollution is no terrible thing. She falls to her knees and plunges her face... the world for an instant becomes a dull roar, a solitary hue.

She pulled out her face. She looked down. Her shoes had become something between sponge and pudding, oozing from their orifices. She placed them into the water, feeling relief as the current dragged away the mud and clay. She pulled them off, pulled off the rotting socks... her bare feet were pale, completely robbed of blood. She stepped back into the water, shivering as the chill spread up her body. She first peels away her pants, made rigid yet brittle by the mud. Her few belongings: packages of cakes, a few family pictures, The dense trackpants melt in the water, unearthing the marks of civilization etched into the fabric. She pulled off her jacket, then the t-shirt





underneath it, letting them fall into the water, letting them get caught on a branch. A splash spilled water onto her skin, prompting her to jump and grind her teeth. A strange cowardice gripped her... even with dirt caked onto her body, she shivered in fear of chilled, hostile water. She peeled away the bra, the underwear stained with blood... she counts, adin, dva, dri; she shouts and plunges herself into the river.

She studied herself in the mirror of the truck, squeezing her hair, clearing it of splinters and stones. Yelena... Yelena... it gave her a foul aftertaste in her mouth. Could these bones, this flabby flesh pale and polished, stained with freckles and scars, really be the extent of everything that name meant? She pulled her wet clothes from the river and laid them out on the roof of the truck, which was now burning hot from the rising sun. She felt bare, but somehow not altogether nude... she imagined herself as a naked corpse: river chill running through her mouth, underneath her arms, her hairs standing at attention, a numbness in her sex. Dull light roved over little buds, growing sharp and dense on polished glass. A rash oozed 'neath a thigh, with dense archipelagos of rough flesh in a salty sea. A flake of dried skin laid on the surface, delicate like paper. Yelena... Yelena; just saying it grants license to



the warm-blooded, puts off the writhing darkness, a ward against unremarkable bones. In her head, she'd rehearsed her death over & over again-- but every death felt special, genuine contours in each staging, sapping trauma of mundane certainty. Doesn't the body come together as easily as it comes apart? A dull ache presses in her belly. She felt a hunger she could not satiate, her soul a rumbling belly. She opens the truck. There in the darkness of its cabin, behind the chairs, she sees the brilliant sparkle of an eye. She jumps... a spasm of fear and she hides behind the open door, covering herself, shielding herself: "who are you?" There's no answer. "Who are you?" The sparkle disappears, and a small figure claws at the steering wheel to reveal itself from the shade. She saw the face of a young girl, flaxen skin, an eye and a cheek molten as if made of wax and put under a heat lamp. "Who are you?" She said again, less tensely with the grip of her hand loosening. The face stared, nothing in its dark eye. A single mole sat underneath her flat nose. "Kak tebya zavut?" The young girl shook her head, her gaze low and subdued. "Ne znayesh?" The young girl scratched her face, and then pointed at her empty mouth. She let go of the door, her face slowly softening up. "Menya zavut Yelena."

Yelena fed the young girl what she'd kept of the



cakes, watching her violently chew, tearing apart the packaging in passionate hunger as she sat on the front seat. She saw her tattered dress, the old fashioned shoes-- so different from the tracksuit feeling hot and dry on Yelena's skin. She imagined the girl with her face buried in writing lessons, her head slouching as her hand drew cursive circles. Had she survived whatever had happened back there? Did they leave her behind? Or did she somehow escape the end that her parents had faced back there in that dark place that now colonized her imagination. Yelena could see the black when she closed her eyes, the way everything crumbled under the slightest touch, their eyes made of coal. She felt tears well up in her eyes, and cursed herself for her crude sentimentality. She covered her face with her hands, keeping her reddening eyes unburdened. The young girl watched, chewing along, her face empty of recognition. "Mnye zhaly." Yelena zipped up her jacket, and saw between bites that the young girl still had her tongue. What had made it vestigial then? Why would she not speak? Had she made an oath? Or did the young girl simply have nothing to say? In a fuzzy wave of impressions, at what moment should she grasp onto the edges and bring forth order from noise? To Yelena, it seemed laughable. Like staring at your arm and pointing out skin cells. "Ya nazavu tebjá 'Natalia;' dotchka Nay-toja." Yelena



named her after Nay-toe, for Natalia must be its offspring; born in its grasp, raised in illegible waters. From the radio cross-chatter, man-drawn borders, and economic treaties, Natalia was immaculately conceived, dogma given body & form.

Yelena squatted down on the ground, picking up some of the sun-bleached stones and letting them tumble back down. What happens to the children of Nay-toe? Do they wander the Zone, searching for things to desire and so hold as part of themselves? Or format, journey north to leave the Zone and acquire another name thru' raids on the mailbox. Her head felt swollen, as if its interior had shrunk, the same few ghost images of Christine burnt onto four lonely walls. A nervous tremor in her chest begged for distraction, to hide Natalia jumped out of the truck, a toe poking out of her leather shoes into grassy pebbles. She wiped her chocolate covered face with her hands, then fell down onto her knees before Yelena. A restless boredom; the silence between them made Yelena sob with searching eyes. "Pizdets. Kuda eta idyot?" she whispered to herself as she wiped away her tears. An aluminum can floating in a bay, empty; awaiting collection. Half of Natalia's face contorted, with a twitch in her lips. She arranged a few pebbles, and drew in chocolate a line that passed through

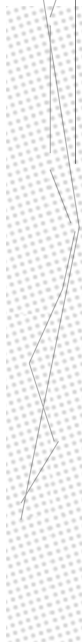


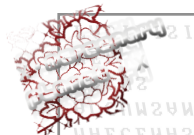
them. She stacked some more pebbles, and pointed at its base. Yelena studied the design, her red eyes flicking between Natalia's face and her creations. Natalia pointed at the truck, then motioned at a handful of pebbles, arranging them by the larger stack at the end of the chocolate line. "Schto? Schto eta?" Natalia pointed at the truck again, then held a pebble over the chocolate line and wiggled it like a worm. "Daroga," Yelena muttered. Natalia set the wiggling pebble over at the pile, then put her hands over her ears and mimicked overwhelming disgust. "Kto? Kto tam? Lyudi?" Natalia sat silently for a few seconds, sucking on her thumb. She took a larger, flat piece of stone, and with chocolate drew a compass with a line radiating from each cardinal direction. Yelena's feverish face softened up into a smile. "Davai." She rose and climbed onto the truck, motioning for Natalia to enter. Nay-toe takes, Nay-toe gives





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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

Name: Alastair Keyes

Birthday: March 23

Occupation: drug dealer

Sex: male

Blood type: O positive

Likes: hustling, the weird side of Soundcloud, trolling boomers on Above Top Secret forums, feel, pegging, femdom, making people think he's a school shooter

Dislikes: blackpilled people, older Millennials, 12-step programs, fact checkers, glowies

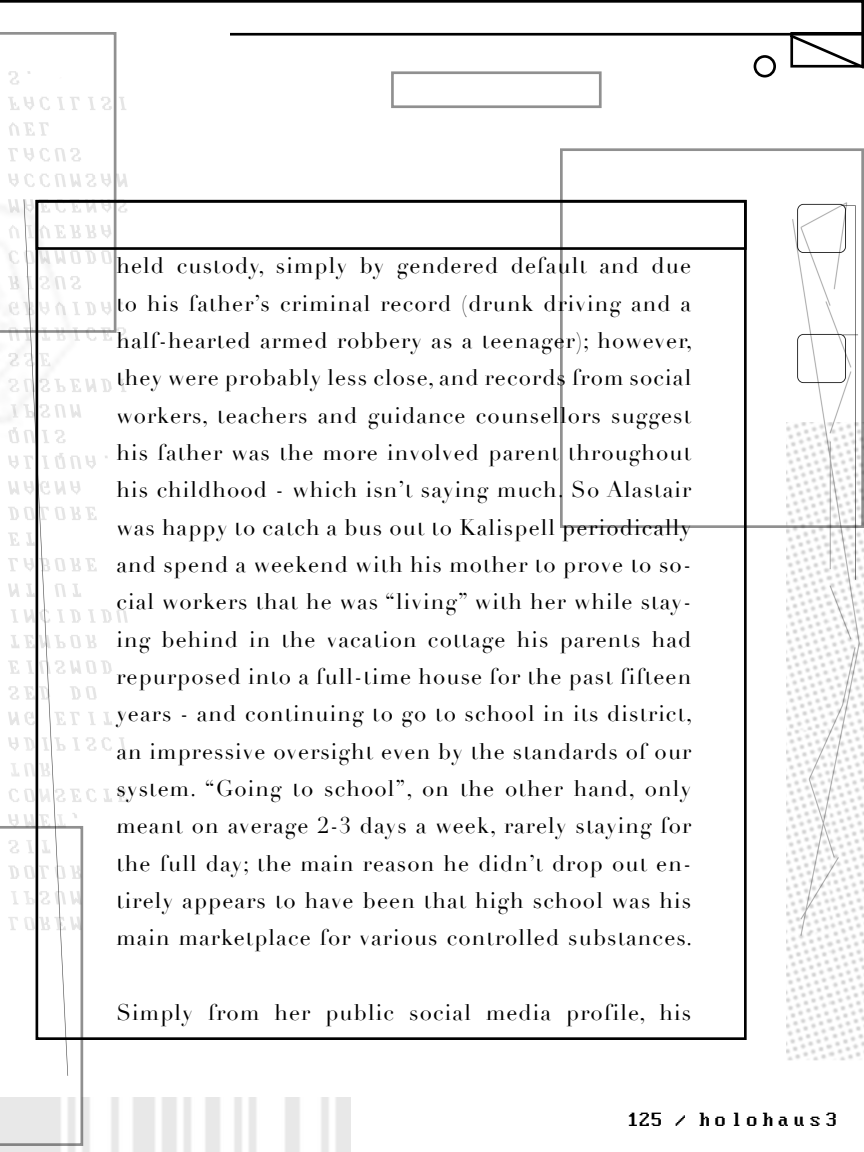
Theme song: Burial - Ghost Hardware



A preliminary report tagged Alastair Keyes as potentially one of the most destabilizing influences on Leona Lillywhite.






Further investigation suggests she is unlikely to take him seriously. Alastair Keyes has had freer reign to develop his niche interests than either Jax or Leona, having lived on his own since his parents divorced at 15 and both moved out to find jobs in different cities. On paper his mother

POI datafile



held custody, simply by gendered default and due to his father's criminal record (drunk driving and a half-hearted armed robbery as a teenager); however, they were probably less close, and records from social workers, teachers and guidance counsellors suggest his father was the more involved parent throughout his childhood - which isn't saying much. So Alastair was happy to catch a bus out to Kalispell periodically and spend a weekend with his mother to prove to social workers that he was "living" with her while staying behind in the vacation cottage his parents had repurposed into a full-time house for the past fifteen years - and continuing to go to school in its district, an impressive oversight even by the standards of our system. "Going to school", on the other hand, only meant on average 2-3 days a week, rarely staying for the full day; the main reason he didn't drop out entirely appears to have been that high school was his main marketplace for various controlled substances.

Simply from her public social media profile, his



mother (Lucinda Naylor, employed as a receptionist from a chiropractor to a sketchy nonprofit) is obviously a chronic stoner; this may have been part of her neglectful parenting style; her metadata also reveals few hobbies outside of smoking. His father (Clinton Keyes), whose ranch security job drug tested him periodically, may have been cleaner, but disappeared on weekends for overnight parties with a small circle of friends almost all of who have records for cocaine, opioids and other substances. The first rumour of him dealing marijuana, probably from his mother's stash, appears in school notes at 13, but he spun it into a bullying case and had the snitches disciplined for spreading rumours, with a manipulative cleverness that crops up surprisingly often for someone so habitually isolated and - on tests, at least - stupid. (Speaking of tests, while these are obviously unreliable it's worth noting that Alastair compiled an unusually thorough psychological profile on himself in the form of various online diagnostic and personality quizzes between the ages of 14 and 16. He classifies himself as a "narcissist empath", a category

too obviously made up to be supported as well as it is by the results.) Alastair would eventually inherit both of his parents' habits at least, but his interest in drug selling would have been as much the money as the drugs - both his parents were poor, both before and after the (itself costly) divorce, and the regular allowance he received from both of them was scaled to the assumption one of them was taking care of him when neither was.

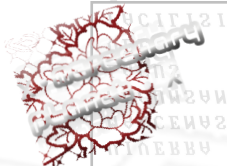
Alastair does not appear to have perceived any of this as tragic or traumatic. In the most viral video on his surprisingly popular "hickcore eboy" Tik Tok account (and several followups clarifying it wasn't ironic) he boasts about how lucky he was for the freedom parental neglect afforded him, saying it made him "supersane" and advocating it as a model for the "reptile parenting" of the future. (He drinks amanita muscaria tea harvested from his own backyard throughout the video.) Reports from school counsellors - including one jealous aside that he acts a counsellor for half the other troubled kids they see - show nothing at odds with this. This outlook



dovetails with his radical politics, which could best be described as “inchoate but principled libertarian”. He may owe this to a synthesis of his parents, a born-again Republican (dad) and left-of-Dem hippie (mom) who bonded over back-to-the-land ideals and rage at the Establishment, but whose political differences played a significant role in their separation. Unlike most William Cooper-reading gun nuts in his area, he consistently supports queer rights and religious freedom. He aligns these with his defence of drug use in a series of formative forum arguments with Hoppeans, following a doxing attempt over which he abandoned any explicitly political subculture outside of conspirituality. Keyes is a Gnostic dystheist who believes our universe is a war-game being played by aliens. His worldview is almost as idiosyncratic as Mai Obiokolam’s, which may have been what drove him, in a remarkable coincidence, to Obiokolam’s content. (A general curiosity about electronic music and trans women didn’t make this more difficult.) During an extended period immediately out of high school, he attempted to prove that UFOs were

administrative programs correcting glitches in that system, and claimed Mai as part of a faction of “conscientious objecting angels”. He has since wiped most of this older content in his attempt - diligently capitalistic, a quality that distinguishes him from his partner Jax Lillywhite - to rebrand as an eboy and seduce cottagecore girls to come visit him. (During most of this period that could be described as a psychotic break, Jax was his only friend and vice versa, and their dealing ambitions grew from the petty to the grandiose.) It is unclear how much of his worldview remains and will influence his interactions with the Lillywhites and the First Contact.

His porn profile is too vast to approximate without a full second report. You gotta see some of this shit.



Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

Last Time

with her brother jax, leona tries to continue her life with halation as they learn to translate each other's experiences from the planetary to the familiar strifes at the dinner table conducted in silence



CW: war, drugs, gun violence, induced insanity, confinement, forced masculinization threat, sexual gaze

“This is for Wacoooo!!” Alastair screamed as he slammed his elbow against the back door handle, resting his wrist on the rolled down window, digging lines in his skin as he used the frame to steady the Zenith Z-RS and drawing blood from the recoil as he started firing.

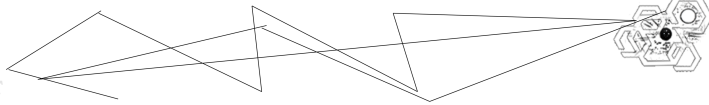
I was hyperventilating so hard I didn't even try to stop him. This was so close to how Delilah went that it felt like her memories were inhabiting me alongside Halation's, even though I had only experienced them in nightmares. The ominous thing that had been pursuing us skidded to a halt on the side of the road. The finger of blue-white light from those freaky too-powerful headlights that had been stroking my skin like the creepy gay homophobic church kid at the ninth grade dance slipped off my shoulder. It had been - it had looked like an inno-

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cent semitruck, but it was now barrelling down on us like the tanker from fucking Duel. I didn't know who they were or whether they had anything to do with Waco. I didn't know if Alastair even thought he knew. But for all it was souped up it was never going to scare the rational part of me as much as the cars that had merged onto the road and started tailing behind it, either Cloudskater's regular cops or the weirdos' actual fed backup, a few hundred metres behind it. And they must have heard those shots.

Alastair popped his head back inside, leaned over my shoulder as Jax drove. "That thing was fucking armoured - I hit it and didn't break the glass - but it still swerved." He laughed. "Who the fuck - one of those weird halfassed agencies they drag out to harass protesters in DC? Fucking mercenaries?"

"Dude why the fuck would there be mercenaries after us." Jax sounded like he was on helium.

"Edison Lens," I reminded Alastair.

"Huh?"

"They're not drug mercenaries or whatever. The badge they showed me said Edison Lens." I pulled my





phone out of my pocket and started searching Duckduckgo. My heart sank at the first page of results. Declassified documents describing a collaborative agency proposed by US and Soviet intelligence and scientists at the height of UFO mania in the 1960s. Dismissed by higher-ups on both sides as a security vulnerability with no benefits, never funded or approved. At least not in these documents. I read this off to Alastair. “Man, you’ve never heard of this? It seems right up your alley.”

“Shut up while I’m aiming. I can slow these guys down the same.”

“The point is, they know. They saw me.” My voice was cold and hard. I didn’t know I could sound like this - I hadn’t tried to since tabletop roleplays over voice chat when I was 12. I wasn’t human any more, but not because I had an alien inside me. I was not human but Human with a capital H. I was a representative. I remembered my thesis on Marx’s concept of species-being. I was no longer I. I would be alone except my mind trembled with one who felt the same way. My heart was pounding in my ears, pushing out terror and despair with this purpose and anticipation. “Are you in this, for real? Because if you’re not, you can jump out of the car and say I kicked you out. We’re



not going back.”

“We’re in luck!” Alastair whipped out a rolled up sticker of the Tasmanian devil from Looney Tunes. “I found this in the truck stop bathroom a week ago - Taz is tonight - so there’ll be less people at basically all of the labs in the county except the Hispanic one. I suggest we hit Cloudskater’s because, I mean, the guy calls himself Cloudskater, he’s definitely going to be at Taz.”

“What’s Taz? Who the fuck calls himself Cloudskater?” I squint, realizing I’ve fallen asleep with my eyes open in one of Halation’s memories again.

“Temporary Autonomous Zone. It’s a kind of rave in a field. Started by some weird hippies who moved out here in the 90s and now eighty percent swamped with redneck dipshits.”

“Nobody was doing that when I lived here.” And I bemused by the reference to anarchist literature - where I was from, you couldn’t get away with naming anything after that pedophile. Probably none of the “redneck dipshits” knew the name was a reference to a faggot.



"You didn't know the right people, it's been going for two decades. Also internet makes it easier now although it still tries to maintain the whole analog ARG mystique."

I stared into Alastair's eyes for a few seconds with a strange, disorienting mirroring impression. It was starting to gel for me that Alastair - the person Jax had started to gravitate towards as soon as he'd lost me - was a lot like the kind of person I might have become if I'd stayed here, developing the same interests (come to think of it, my own leftism had always gravitated a bit towards the paranoid style), the same doubts and resentments, and learning the avenues there were for them out here, digging them out like a fox. In fact, what if he wasn't even a chaser but a - I stopped thinking before I'd be unable to contain a laugh or at least an awkward facial expression.

"Cloudskater's a guy who cooks primarily so he can hotbox his living room and listen to metal every other day and sell what he has left over, but he actually makes a shit ton because he has blackmail on some trucker who gives him stuff cheap. If we don't raid him first somebody is probably gonna kill him. He should have enough chems for... going by how long you were saying this was lasting



your alien... another week? And the other reason I picked Cloudskater is, he's a goldbug too, and I bet I know where he hides it. Meaning we could start just buying stuff up, stockpiling for the long haul."

(We saw the truck at the gas station - the same one where Alastair had found the Taz sticker, and apparently something of a hub for illegal activities - on the way out, which was funny because we'd seen it on the way to our hideout, six hours earlier. I wouldn't have noticed if Alastair hadn't remarked on it - at this point I think he was just showing off his rural street smarts, but he didn't seem to have ever seen it or even have a clear idea what it might be doing sitting there for so long. I ventured it had probably just broken down. There was nothing else suspicious about it.)

Cloudskater's lab was out to the West where the foothills started to rise, in the central lodge of an abandoned campground and hiking trail. I tensed a little when we passed through the inconspicuously hanging-open wooden gate (a suspended log with a curled-up metal sign) and started inching through the twists and turns of the dirt road leading up, headlights turned off. The road was hemmed in on both sides by low-lying scrub that in a few





places stuck out wavy branches into it, but no more than a few scrawny disease-gnawed trees. I still didn't have a clear sense how much raids like we were doing were a thing that happened, but this guy had certainly picked a place that gave him tons of time to see anyone coming.

But as we pulled up in front of the building, nobody came out to meet us, no alarms went off, no lights were on. Jax told me and Alastair to get out - he would keep driving along the trail to somewhere less obvious in case somebody came back while we were here. Alastair had his Z-5RS and I had my Roland Special. We both wore balaclavas. As we approached the door a flickery white-blue light came on - too weak (and poorly angled) to even reach us, though evidently a sensor had. In the light I could also see the silhouette of a small camera over the door. I took almost a minute to aim, and took it out in one hit.

I couldn't entirely take credit for it. At the trap, at target practice, on video games and a number of other activities, I'd been figuring out what I could do with Hala-tion inside me. Their species hadn't evolved to be symbiotic with basically any animal without conferring some advantages on their hosts. The major one was brain-inter-



face. The direct neural connections didn't just let them share information with my conscious mind - it let them send signals to parts of my brain I didn't even realize I was using. (All of these levels of brain chemistry occurred on a single plane for Halation in a way that gave their consciousness a distinctly different texture than mine - a sort of flat dreamlike sheen I could only analogize, again, to certain psychedelics. Indeed, Halation's species had apparently jump-started the sentience of several other species on their planet - in a way that couldn't help but remind me of a certain non-mainstream scientist's views about certain mushrooms - which Halation had instantly taken to and now I had a sidequest to find "Cloudskater"'s shroom stash and see if Halation could commune with the mushroom, which I didn't think would work but would be incredibly fun.) In that moment, I had had Halation shut down basically all of my conscious subprocesses except my aim, and juice my focus to the extent that it felt like I was zooming in on the camera on an Imax screen.

Just to be safe, we shot out the light too. Then crouched under the porch for about a minute to see if anyone came running to respond to the shots. Then pulled ourselves up and strafed to the door. Alastair had a lock-pick. I stayed behind him, scanning the woods.



A flurry of noise. Alastair doubled back so fast he keeled over the rail of the porch, fumbling his gun in his hands. “Fuck me, I don’t wanna shoot a dog, man!”

I spun around to face the door. The black Cane Corso was leashed, but its leash extended far enough to reach me as soon as it noticed I was there and it couldn’t reach Alastair. I hadn’t tested this yet, but I didn’t want to shoot a dog either and didn’t have the time to aim, so I reached out a hand towards its face while backing up. As its tongue and teeth scraped my palm, a line of multicoloured liquid, vaguely phosphorescent even in the dark, shot from my ear down my neck, over my shoulder, along my rigid outstretched arm to the tips of my fingers which clenched unconsciously around the dog’s huge muzzle. It stopped, mouth half open. The liquid had gone into its nose, and didn’t seem to be extending any further. Confusing, foreign sensations started to trickle into my mind. In some ways the dog’s mind felt more alien than Halation’s. More abstract consciousness, Halation had told me, was more “interoperable”; their range of symbiotic experience had given their species a distinct theory of consciousness within Meteorology’s panpsychism. Interoperability was neither an absolute, like the sentient/nonsentient distinction humans applied to other animals and AI, nor a crite-



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tion for ethical subjecthood, at least for a Meteorologist. Given enough time, we could probably “make” the dog “interoperable”, a process I wasn’t totally sure whether or not would entail making it sentient by human standards. As cool as it would be to come out of this raid with not just another week’s worth of alien atmosphere but a talking dog, this would take a lot of time and painstaking consent negotiation, so we settled for putting it to sleep.

Alastair pulled himself back up over the fence, and I giggled at the dust and scrapes on his hands and his dishevelled hair. “What the fuck, since when does Cloudskater know how to look after a dog. Does he even remember to fucking feed it?”

I reached down and tugged on the dog’s leash. It was made of tough, black, ridged serrated fibre, buckled tightly with plastic. I felt along it, fingers slipping between the tough material and soft fur, following an intuition I’d barely been able to pick out of the confused signals that had jolted my brain, until they ran over the gentle indentations of letters. I didn’t have to look down to read them. K-9.

I jumped back. “Not his. Cop dog.”





“Shit!” Alastair hissed, and backed all the way up to the treeline.

I hid under the porch and waited. But there weren't any noises from inside the building. When I was confident the coast was clear I went back to regroup with Alastair, who had just phoned Jax and told him to take the trail that circled back around to the highway and make sure no one was coming.

“Why would they just leave their dog here. Do you think they would have like... lent it to him as a guard dog? If he was like, an asset? I don't think anyone's here.”

“Fucking cops. What if you didn't have... alien powers, what if it got shot.”

“Fucking cops.” For reasons I had yet to fully explain to anyone in this part of the country, I couldn't agree more.

We moved through the doors like fucking cops ourselves, in a video game, specifically SWAT 4. We had the same “training”, as it were. The first room, as far as we could tell in the dark, had nothing in it besides dusty shelves of old brochures. Posters peeling off the walls,



eighties horror movies, an old Conan cover. A sleeping bag on the floor. The next was pitch black.

“More of you. What the hell is going on tonight.”

A light switched on as soon as we entered, and sound - buzzsawing, dissonant guitars. An AR-15 trained on us in a relaxed grip, but we had two to one and didn't flinch. A man sitting in a wooden chair, widemouthed sneer in a thin face. Long silver hair (dyed), draping over his shoulders in curls at the tips, Grateful Dead bandana around his neck, white undershirt over his sunken chest. Skeleton keys tattooed on his shoulders and something in Hebrew across his collarbone. Two men bound, gagged and blindfolded on either side of his chair. An Afro-Latino man with an oddly square-shaped head wore small sunglasses and a stiff black suit that might have looked sharp or impressive if it hadn't been folded and crumpled into undignified shapes, the thickness and shine of the fabric only accentuating the way it bunched and wrinkled around the rope. A pale but vaguely Eastern man - maybe Caucasian-as-in-Caucasus? - wore a too-small white T-shirt that pulled up over a nicotine-patched gut and Hawaiian swim shorts. Both were balding. A pair of earpieces that had presumably been in their ears lay at Cloudskater's feet.





“D-drop your gun, put your hands up,” Alastair reacted instantly.

Cloudskater leisurely lifted his hands and let the long gun slip, without the smile fading from his face. “Alastair. I told these fuckers when they were trying to ask me about aliens or something, you’d know more about that than me. But of course you were in with them the whole time. Who are they?” He was dialling 911 on a shitty old flip phone absentmindedly in the hand that wasn’t holding his gun.

Alastair looked at me in panic. I tried to convey with a look - don’t let him in on anything. He somehow understood.

“I-I have no idea who these guys are. What were they asking you... about aliens?”

“They’ve been snooping around here in their truck the last few days. Cops lent me their dog - yeah we have an understanding, like you wouldn’t if you got the chance - because I warned about them. You guys all tell me I’m an idiot for getting high on my own supply, but that’s why I notice stuff like this. Did you know I have a photographic memory? Photographic memory plus uncon-



trollable flashbacks - now that's a superpower, man."

The guitars surrounding us shifted from a sensual phallic pounding to a frantic, mechanical gallop, with a synthesizer stretching out agonized arpeggios in high frequencies.

"Yeah, but the aliens?"

"Don't play dumb. If you didn't know what they were talking about, why are you even here?" He didn't seem interested in me at all so far. Alastair glanced at me again.

"We're the ones with two guns on you, man. You answer our questions. What did they say about aliens?"

Cloudskater opened his mouth - then his face melted like clay. We scanned frantically for any sign of what was happening - but neither of the people next to him seemed to have moved - then his eyes flashed back open, rolled back to their whites, screaming at a harmonic with the static growl that had just joined an electric yowl over the guitars, whaling at us with the butt of his gun, Alastair ducking back too fast to aim, veins popping out on his neck. And as I tried to steady my arm towards him



before Alastair started spraying -

- a black shape tore through the open doorway. The dog slammed into Cloudskater, paws first keeping its teeth from immediately finding his throat. The gun swung uselessly against its side in the same moment its jaws found his wrist. The drugged Cloudskater was no less savage than the dog, clawed hand tearing at its face, its eyes, jaws gnashing as it reared back and its defensive claw brought red brush-strokes across his neck. Not dead yet, the two rolled on the floor. In the meantime both men had stood up and trained their guns on us (some sort of pistols I didn't recognize at a glance, probably German) - Alastair, backed into the doorway, no longer holding his steady.

"Cops get here," said the white man, in the sort of huff one used for berating an uncooperative child or service worker, "or anyone else, and we call feds. When everything stacks up we have every right to be here."

"But you're not feds? Or do you have a badge to show me."

He rolled his neck back and dug in one pocket, then another but the black man, who had clearly practiced snapping his whole body in a two-part borderline-mar-



tial-arts gesture to reach his breast pocket and then thrust out with his palm, beat him to pull out a glass circle in a black plastic square. I could barely make out the words embossed in scratched gold like an office participation trophy: Edison Lens.

“Sorry I dunno what anime that’s from.”

“What are you doing with that dog, though.”

His voice sounded like he was asking for an autograph for his favourite comic book.

“Depends. What kind of agreement can we reach, and mayyyybe” - I held my gun steady, tensing my hand on the trigger to keep his eyes on it - “I can tell you something, if you tell us-“

He slumped to the floor. My gun switched immediately to the other, who was slow to turn, and gestured Alastair to back through the door and cover me.

The dog started barking. I couldn’t easily sustain Halation’s influence on more than one creature at once, but I figured it could hold its own. Meanwhile Halation was spreading across the floor. The other man in black





climbing up on the stool. By the time he was trapped on it, Alastair had trained the Z-5RS on him and we could back out slowly. With his other hand he was dialling Jax.

“There’s a truck idling on the side of the highway, right by the entrance,” Jax told us, voice ragged with nerves.

“Oh great.” Alastair glanced at me, then back to the phone: “It’s way worse than that here, you have no idea.”

As if to punctuate his anticlimactically delivered verdict Cloudskater’s jaws sank into the dog’s throat and blood bubbled up around its choked, shocked whimper.

“Do we still have time to take what we came here for. It’s really important.” Halation had reached the other man in black. “I can hold them here, you grab everything you can. Then as soon as Jax pulls up we run.”

Remembering running carrying a huge tank of Freon over the porch and slamming it in the trunk like a quarterback. Not sure if it was just my own adrenaline strength or Halation messing with my neurochemistry somehow. Alastair behind me keeping a bead on the en-



emies slowly emerging from their disorientation. Jax had thankfully removed the license plate, at the cost of attracting the attention of any cop on the road. But on some discomforting level, they seemed too hapless to even think of as enemies. Nothing in their facial expressions or body language suggested they were any more prepared for this situation than us. What they had done.... but then, they had to be looking the same way at what we had done. If we could maintain that psychological edge... if I didn't lose my cool...

At first we tried to take a long way around to another entrance Jax had found, but when we got close we could see a bunch of parked headlights, and there were never cars at that disused entrance onto a dirt road. We barrelled across rough grass to avoid passing the cabin directly and made it out a couple dozen metres behind the truck he had mentioned. Soon it had not only turned around after us, but ditched its trailer and started accelerating faster than any of us had heard of a semi being able to. I told Jax what had happened as we veered down every loop and detour he could think of to shake them off.

A corner of Jax's smile flashed in the light-dirty



rearview. "Are you kidding? I've been looking for an excuse to get out of here since you did. I'm gonna take them up the mountainsides and try to lose them up there. I dunno what kind of training they get but they didn't spend Grade 12 racing those turns."

"You nearly crashed your dad's shit on those turns."

"This time some feds will."

"Will you guys shut up?" I groaned. "I'm trying to talk to Halation and work out what's the plan when they do catch us."

In reality I was rummaging through the Zo-boomafoo closet of their mind to see if there was anything useful to getting us out of here, any secret weapons. I wasn't sure what getting caught by the feds meant to my brother or Alastair - given the blitheness with which Jax had told me about his first federal crimes, I wasn't sure it meant anything at all to them except glory, battle scars, martyrdom. To me it meant torture, rape, entire spaces locked away from the world and dedicated to the kind of sadism I'd only seen in the back of people's eyes... and the complete defeat of everything I'd prayed for that night



I met Halation, the expansion of the power I'd spent my miserable life pretending to fight to the far corners of the galaxy. And getting caught by these "Edison Lens" guys... Halation kept trying to drag my mind back to that, with a mix of terror and interest. That there were humans out there who had prepared, in some serious, however malevolent, way, for what Halation was... maybe we should have turned around and handed ourselves in to them. Was I being selfish?... we certainly wouldn't be able to raid any more drug labs around here, right now the course of action we had decided on the spot was to not even return home and go on the run across the country, which was insane and probably little more than buying time to come up with a bargaining plan. Anyone with the resources for that truck, or whatever they had injected Cloudskater with, on the other hand, would have the resources to procure all the chemicals Halation needed... but I had told Halation they could go, if they wanted. They could open the window and stream off the tip of my finger and pool into that truck and end this. And they wouldn't budge.

Over the last several days, we had brainstormed a plan together. The advantages of turning ourselves in were obvious, but Halation turned out to be more reluctant than any of us. They were the most hesitant voice but





the firmest 'no' in deliberations, to the point that Jax and Alastair had wondered if I could only communicate with them in yes-no questions. It was like having a Socratic daemon, a Holmesian narrowing algorithm. Nothing I had told them about humans made them particularly inclined to trust human authorities. And the threat of worsening the war was not only at least as bad as losing or continuing it - it was, for their side, the very thing the war was being fought over. Introducing humanity to the galaxy under its current administration might be as big a risk as the Adipose.

But they trusted me. They had seen everything I could possibly ever hide. If we changed humanity, then maybe humanity would be ready to enter the galaxy - to enter this war. And I had always been confident humanity could be changed, only despaired of a way to do it. Our interests - we realized almost guiltily - aligned.

Once we secured a reliable supply of atmosphere, Halation would teach me how to produce technologies that all of humanity would clamour for. My first objective was to obtain the materials to build the foundation of faster-than-light space travel, as well as a number of unique materials, clean energy sources and powerful computing



systems: a Weak Asymmetry Field. Almost every interstellar civilization had some version of them, though each with its own particular trick, its own capacities and limitations; it wasn't clear how much the methods Halation was familiar with would work with Earth materials, but Meteorology had a particularly good set of general theorems, and our first step would be contacting a trustworthy physicist who would be able to make sense of how to apply them here. That would mean contacting Mai; she had, I recalled, a particularly good Discord friend at Stanford who had collaborated on worldbuilding for one of her albums. (Maybe they were dating now? I had always gotten the vibe that there could have been something between them.) I was torn between giddiness imagining her joy to be part of this, terror at the danger she'd be in, a dull aching apprehension trying to imagine how she'd respond to the compromises I was already prepared to make...

In twenty or thirty years, maybe, when the world was thoroughly transformed and unrecognizable, we would consider leading it to war.

You don't have to do this for me, Halation was now telling me, in a voice so clear it came through as sound, although we had already been over this. I'm not





going to ask you to die.

Why? my brain reacted spitefully, although every leftist, every fighter, I'd ever met had told me the same thing. Except Mab. We'd all believed that about each other, held it as foundational to our ethics that we'd never tell each other how or when to fight, even the ones who pretended to want a great revolutionary vanguard leader to do it for us, but was that why we'd never accomplished anything?

One night with Mai I'd thought, I could murder your parents, but hadn't said anything, because if nothing else another white person killing black people wouldn't help anything, but that almost felt like conscripting her into the fight, telling her she had to bear it for the sake of her identity.

But what did all these fantasies of violence mean to me anyway? What made me think I had it in me to do the thing I had spent most of my life running away from? (I mean I had, on numerous occasions, successfully and without compunction, but not like... not like...)

Besides, I'm not trying to die. If I die you die. That would defeat the entire purpose. So let's get out of



here, OK?

I couldn't tell who had roped who into what. Should I be as worried about whether I was stringing them along as they seemed to be for me, when it felt like the latter? All my dreams crashing over me to the point that it still didn't feel real. As I thought that the light crept back across my shoulder - an omen of a reality I hadn't escaped.

Gunshots went off over my shoulder again.

"Are the cop cars here yet?"

I glanced back up at the window, where Alastair's body now seemed to be framed in a strange yellowish light.

"No, it's the fucking truck again!"

"Huh?" Jax yelped. "We should have gotten a huge lead when it went offroad like that, how fast is it going?"

"I can't really tell. It seems to be going about as fast as us still."

"Dammit, are they playing with us?" Jax ground



his teeth.

I didn't mention it but the light outside didn't seem to be just streetlight. It was hazy and glowed from everywhere, like city-light bouncing off the sky. It felt like a headache to look at. Something in my head - some side-effect of alien chemistry, the unreality I had just been thinking of - was probably distorting it. I wondered if it was a premonition of death. If Delilah's last ride had turned into something this otherworldly.

I closed my eyes, half-expecting the light to stay with me behind my eyelids. It didn't.

The car pulsing through my flesh was a comfort I wondered if I deserved before I died.

Gunshots. "No good - they can see their windows" armour is holding and aren't even avoiding it now."

"Then shoot for their tires, dumbass. Should have been doing that in the first place."

We're stuck together. You don't know how often I've been in that situation. How often it happens here.

There was a word for it in Meteorology, and the



thought comforted them. Right, what was I thinking, this was a freaking symbiote. That was why they were so careful. A kind of carefulness all my friends used to pay lip service to, developed elaborate rulesets to approximate, but discarded all the time, like Delilah driving off into the night to leave all of us alone, like me letting Jax drive us all into this all-devouring light. I don't get it. What else am I supposed to do.

A weird sound in my ears, like tinnitus.

"Fuck it's swerving too much."

"Well that should slow it down at least?"

"Well that's the weird thing - it isn't. It's veering all over the street but seems to be keeping the same distance from us."

"Huh? OK just a second. Close the window and get in - we're going offroad."

The comforting vibrations turned into a hellish buzzsaw that forced me to sit up. We were completely in the dark now - black leaves brushing, branches cracking on the windows - but somehow I could still see the light,





like a sort of glowing mist. "It's too wide, it shouldn't be able to follow us in here - at least not without getting slowed down quite a bit. And if it gets stuck and blocks the actual feds, we'll be off scot free."

The truck screeched behind us. Brilliant headlights fell away from the rearview then strafed across, broken by the cutout shadows of leaves.

"Where does that term come from anyway. Maybe because we're gonna drink like fuckin Scots when we free, am I right?"

"Jesus, Jax, shut up. You're not Peter Parker." I stared into the rearview.

Why weren't those lights getting dimmer.

Was I talking about the truck lights, or the haze I was seeing.

The tinnitus sound was also getting louder. I don't need this right now - I need to figure out what's happening - something's wrong - I need to figure out what I can do -

Halation had been quiet for the last several min-



utes.

“Hate to say this, but I think you might have underestimated these guys again. The good news is, they definitely can’t swerve in here. I’m gonna end this.”

I closed my eyes, tuned out everything, and listened.

A grating fear, and a keening heartache.

Tak-a-tak-a-tak. Like someone knocking on a door in the far distance. It didn’t mean anything to me.

It didn’t mean anything now.

“Got ‘em! WOOOOO!”

I didn’t even feel the vibrations any more.

“Hey what the fuck. Why aren’t we moving.”

I opened my eyes. The headlights behind us were still. But so were we.

“I don’t get it. The engine’s still on. The brakes haven’t engaged. There’s nothing wrong up here, except... we’re not moving.”



“Should have known they’d have some fucking supervillain tech like this.”

In the rearview, the truck’s doors opened.

“Guess we’ll have to make a run for it... Leona?”

Without thinking, I had opened my mouth.

Made noises I didn’t know my vocal cords could make. Long, layered notes. Notes like I had heard in dreams before.

The tinnitus sound lowered into a comprehensible register.

Music. Could it be called music.

No. Language.

Help me.

The trees swayed slowly in the mist of light. By the way their eyes wandered I could tell even Jax and Alastair could see it now.

The men were still running towards us.



Not the same as before, but both men again - a built, tattooed Asian man in Under Armour and another schlubby looking white guy with a literal "Pi day" T-shirt. They hadn't made it any distance out of the truck. They were caught in the headlights, laminated with backlight, one still spinning his legs and arms like he was on a slow-motion hamster wheel, another blinking, panting, leaning and exploring something with his hands.

Maybe if I hadn't had Halation inside me, maybe if I hadn't known what to look for, I wouldn't have seen it, they would have looked like mimes doing the classic invisible box - but in the all-encompassing dim light, I could see a ghostly outline against which they were straining. Three-dimensional, it looked something like a giant waving aloe plant around the truck, if I subtracted everything else from it.

A Weak Asymmetry Field.

Specifically, a weak gravitational asymmetry field. The kind Contemplation's ships used to pull themselves through space - what I daydreamed about christening, as soon I had a working whitepaper for it, the "inchworm drive".





Did it really come down to this trope? Were there aliens already on Earth waiting for us? Did they control the government like in Alastair or Cloudskater's conspiracy theories? Or just this one obscure agency, built to catch anyone who made first contact before anyone else did? Were they on our side?

Then Halation let down the mental barriers and let me hear what the music was saying.

Help me. Take me back.

The signals are wrong. They're breaking me.

I'm here, Halation. We can leave.

Fix me and we can leave.

I took two rapid strides. Halation stopped me right at the edge of whatever the two men - who were looking at me the way I imagine the scorpion must have looked at the frog - were stuck at. You don't have to do this for me. The feeling was different than the last time they'd said this. It wasn't a cool, unyielding Meteorological sense of honour. It was terror, it was even cowardice, it knew itself as this, and yet it was completely, abjectly honest and sin-



cere.

The inchworm drive uses a field of extremely low-density energized cool plasma to suspend a gravitational field whose gravitons oscillate in a tachyonic state. This field and the altered laws of physics within it is bounded within a semi-permeable membrane, like an amoeba, that flickers in and out of existence countless times per second, pulling itself and the ship within it along its preprogrammed path, at faster-than-light speeds without suffering relativistic distortions relative to the outside of the field.

For legal reasons, I've had to fudge a couple details even in that extremely broad definition, but there's no way you'd be able to figure it out if I hadn't.

At the moment, it seemed to have produced several nested fields within each other.

What if it produces another one? I wondered frantically, and Halation sang out my question from my mouth.

Preparing new field launch - radius 1 Scylla. (I'm filling in my own name for the radius of a particular cloud





whirlpool that had become a standardized measurement on Contemplation - about 10 km.) I can't stop it. But I can get you out with it.

Not if you're breaking down, not like this, Halation screamed through my mouth, in Ahasurunu - the language the ship itself was using to speak to us. You'll lose control, you'll die.

I'll get away from their frequencies and then I'll be OK.

What frequencies?

Command frequencies. Too many of them, overlapping. Whole bands consumed by ordered noise.

We can't help you, we can try and come back for you, just shut down, they won't be able to do anything to you if you shut down -

Halation's heart was breaking and they didn't want me to hear it, even though they were using my own voice to break it.

I was actually kind of mad.



Hey - you don't have to do anything for me is a two-way street, you know?

As if by way of a response, Halation's tears sprung to my eyes.

I stepped forward again and pressed up against the semipermeable membrane. I crossed it effortlessly; it felt like walking across a heated knife, a clean slice across your whole body that instantly healed as if it had never happened. Except on the other side my leg buckled. I was withstanding what felt like multiple Gs from every direction at once. The world was denser, heavier.

No wonder they were moving in slow motion. In slow motion, they turned towards me, diverting their attention from the field itself. Their slow motion faces were open with savagery, as if the light and the weight and the different physical laws had brought something out of them. They felt huge and I felt huge, statues moving through nebulae. One's spaceplow hand reaching out towards my wrist, the other towards my face. I coated my hands with Halation as I caught both - whatever this organization was, neither of these were people I would have been scared of the way I might have been scared of an actual Fed.



I trudged, both knees bent, one step further to-
wards the truck.

We had considered one other plan, before setting
off to run away. When we had first gone over the possi-
bility that getting captured might be the safest, the sanest
option. We agreed it wasn't, for ourselves, for humanity,
for the galaxy, but had thought through a way we could
maintain some leverage if we did, what cards we had and
how we'd play them. Our goal would even be basically the
same as in our current plan - effecting change on Earth by
controlling access to things people wanted - but we'd have
to do it under infinitely more pressure. I still wasn't quite
willing to admit, to myself or Halation, that we were going
with this plan. We were going - I was telling - to break into
the truck, make contact with and free the spaceship, go
somewhere they couldn't follow us and only return to the
world when we were ready to change it for good.

But those guys weren't even ready for me - I
wasn't some badass - was I really going to be able to just
fight my way inside that truck? Where some of them, if
they were any like the other ones, would have guns? I had
cheats, but this still wasn't a video game. I wasn't sure why
I was pretending I wasn't expecting to get captured, but



it seemed to be out of an impulse to show off. To show Halation how humans fight, when we're willing to fight, to show her (the second time I had slipped into the pronoun we had established as acceptable but inaccurate like a comfortable sleeping bag) how I'm willing to fight, to go head-on for the impossible until it is, to not surrender and to surrender. I ran in a faster slow-motion, trusting Halation to mitigate the effects of the pain from inside my head, no I wouldn't die from the pressure, do you know how many Gs humans can withstand, even without a goop mode to collapse into, and whatever happened next I had the will to survive.

And as soon as I saw the gun poking out of the open truck door towards me, my run cycle was pulling my own gun up from my pocket, rising slowly like a lift up a mountainside to meet it -

to meet one eye of a tall, thin middle-aged man mostly hidden behind the doorframe.

"Shoot me and you shoot your one chance ever of communicating with an alien."

One new line folded across his forehead.





“But I can shoot you. You’re, who? Anyone that matters around here? So turn around.”

If I could just negotiate these guys into accepting their own total defeat over mutually assured destruction, this would be easy. I knew it wouldn’t be that easy, because they were Cold Warriors, or learned from them. Halation, does your war have people who think like Cold Warriors yet?

“We’re not an equal matchup in multiple ways.”

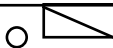
I took one step further. “So what are you gonna do?”

“I dunno. Tell me, what are you gonna do? Maybe you’re going to turn yourselves in. I don’t know.”

“Why are you talking so tough? Your guys are mall cops. Who are you. Who would I be turning myself in to. Your organization doesn’t exist anymore.”

“We exist more than you think anything exists, rebel without a clue.”

And then I felt the butt of the Asian man’s gun in the back of my neck.



Shit! Halation, if we're going to do what we're thinking of doing, I'll get better at this, I promise!

"What are you going to do?"

I sighed. Put my hands up. "Turn off your damn radio."

I woke up midsentence. I had fallen asleep and Halation had figured out how to reanimate my body while they figured out how exactly to undo what had been injected in me - this seemed at odds with their usual ethics, but I could imagine any number of extenuating circumstances. There was a parcel of memories for me to sift through but I was too exhausted to try and go through it.

"-get it, how do you even communicate by radio if you use a full frequency for all your comms? Wouldn't you run out of airwaves?"

"Is there... another way to communicate by radio?"

"Probabilistic signal packets?"



As they stared and tried to form a next question, I blinked as if to say don't ask me, I don't know what that means either although I didn't know if they could tell I was awake now.

"A way to use radio without taking up a whole frequency would have... significant military applications," one ventured.

A darker-skinned man's eyes narrowed. "Does that mean... we've been trying to contact extraterrestrials by radio for a while now. By we I mean uhhh, Earth. Not Edison, but we're in contact with the ones who do."

("Fucking SETI dilettantes," the woman hunched over a crooked plastic desk taking notes on a cheap office pad muttered.)

"Would that be considered, uhhh," the man continued, "an act of war? A threat?"

"Oh we have a bunch of known active frequencies blocked," Halation spoke through me. (It was weird hearing them in my voice, especially since everything about it in terms of phrasing and mannerisms sounded so much like mine - they had to be running some subconscious



processes of mine rather than doing it manually.) “Some of those might be yours.”

“Can we see them.” This was Halation asking. “We need to communicate - make sure nothing else is wrong.”

“Is it - are they - conscious.” The man fidgeted nervously at the thought. “Like artificially intelligent.”

“It’s... complicated. We - they - sorry I’m losing track of who’s speaking here - have a kind of different understanding of that than you.”

“Was it... angry. Is that why it did that.”

Halation wanted to lean on the analogy but I downplayed it; it was a question of Meteorological thinking versus being precise. Halation might have said a flood was angry; but within that there would have been a thousand nuances of non-anthropomorphism unavailable to these frankly probably dumbasses we were talking to. “Overwhelmed. It wasn’t able to process things properly. It’s not that different from... a website being DDOS’d? Except of course the ship is exponentially more complex than a website.” I paused, realizing the pulsing in my head was not just a feature of reality. “Holy shit can someone get





me a coffee or something.”

“Caroline can you go to the coffee machine.”

The woman taking notes on a yellow pad looked up, nonplussed. “If someone takes over notes.”

She lifted an absolute dumptruck ass that spilled over the seat of the chair out of it and settled with a wobble as she pushed open the plastic door like the door of an outhouse behind her. The others glanced at each other.

“And should it be functioning OK now?”

“That’s... I wanna go in and check.” Halation did.
“Once I get my coffee.”

I sat. Shivered, not with cold or really with anything. I took in my surroundings. My hands and feet were ziptied. I was in a tiny metal room lit by stained fluorescent. A corkboard hung on one wall, plastered with papers and printouts. Photographs. Maps. My house. But also several others. “Where did you... find it?” I asked.

“Are we allowed to tell them?” one whispered.

“It might be useful. We need to understand what



happened. You're Leona Lillywhite, right? You remember that name?"

It didn't seem worth lying. "Yeah."

"We were tracking an object whose trajectory we calculated into this forty-mile radius - about the radius you would have blown up - but some sort of radar burst scrambled our tracking right as it landed. We scraped social media and text messages and found this thing in a fertilizer tower, breaking the shit down into methane and ammonia and small amounts of hydrofluoric acid."

I let out an audible sigh of relief. Now that we were captured it was pretty much a given that they could find resources to keep Halation alive but it was good to know this was already accounted for. "So that's how you knew to target the meth labs?"

"Yeah we figured if there were... more of these things, they'd go somewhere with those chemicals. And that guy seemed to know stuff about aliens already - he had suspicious social media posts, things that implied knowledge of UFO events in the near future around here. He wasn't with you?"





I laughed. “No. He’s just some nutcase. We... had our own source of chemicals.”

Eyes narrowed. “You and who else?”

Gulp - hoping they didn’t have a lie detector or someone who could read facial expressions in a TV detective way. “Uhhh. The alien?”

The tall man adjusted his tie and his forehead wrinkles, just as Caroline walked back in with the coffee. This was the first time I saw her face well, and it was just as much of a shock as seeing her ass, eyes far apart and drowned-looking, mouth pulled up over front teeth as if from habitual breathing. After I grabbed the styrofoam cup of coffee she went back to looking down at the notepad and letting her bangs fall over it. “Right. So the chemicals you were looking for, weren’t like fuel or anything, they were...”

“Air, essentially. The ship doesn’t need ‘fuel’ per se. It can generate antimatter from any matter in its accelerator cycles, which in turn can take in energy from its central collider, so it’s practically a perpetual motion machine if it can get either new matter from anywhere, but balancing those cycles and keeping them separate under a



lot of pressure in an unfamiliar environment can be difficult, and if you then overwhelm it with... was it just radio or were you doing other stuff to it."

Fidgets around the room. "Well..."

"Should we give them the notes? Just to make sure that doesn't happen again?"

I sipped the garbage coffee. "Just let me see it."

I stepped through the door. The ship hung in the middle of what looked like a small greenish sun with waving pseudopoda. Within the halo of light visible by the clean-edged beams it refracted it into, it looked like a glassy pinecone, with its spiralling scales connected at the centre by an astonishingly complex array of tubes, like intestines or brain-folds, like some complex pipe organ designed to produce an inner-ear resonance, and bristling with cilia.

"Is there a way for us to touch it?"

"You'd have to contact it with a command packet. Radio, but not a whole band like you guys use - a probabilistic signal packet."





“Can’t you like - sing to it? Isn’t that something you were doing out there?”

“Not while it’s dormant.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth.”

“You don’t.”

“What if we told you to wake it up right now. What if we told you if you don’t do it we won’t care if you’re telling the truth either.”

“Are you sure you want that?”

“Do you genuinely think you’re in the position to negotiate with us? We’ve got your brother and his loser friend out there. We’re not cops and we outrank cops so we have zero procedure to worry about, for anything.” The tall man - who wasn’t all thin but only bulged in the belly - had taken over the negotiations, picking up where we had left off outside the truck.

I gulped.

“I think I’m in a position nobody has ever been in in history, and neither of us really know what that is unless



we talk everything out.”

“Wrong.”

I blacked out again.

“Your life is over. I don’t know what kind of life you think you’re going to get out of this and out of your admittedly unique position - rich and famous? revolutionary? - but let’s make this clear: you don’t get one. Well, you might get a little quiet life somewhere. The kind you always wanted. What kind of life did you always want? You never even got a chance to find out, did you? We know everything about you you could imagine the boogeyman knowing, by the way. You get to find out, maybe, what kind of life you always wanted! You get to spend the rest of your life figuring it out! What you don’t get is to be part of the future we drag out of your body and brain, the easy way or the hard way. But you can help people.”

The voice wasn’t the one that I had been arguing with before. It was one I had only heard a brief snippet of - agreeing to get my coffee. Her wide-apart watery eyes never really seemed to meet mine, but always stayed too close





for me to move mine around comfortably. She bounced the back of the pen on her knuckles. She was leaning over a desk in a small cubicle - still, from the look of the back wall, inside the truck - with books on the desk. Liu's Memory of Earth's Past - the entire trilogy. Behind the desk a single motivational poster: an photo of a muscular hiker with a water bottle on each hip re-enacting Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer Above The Clouds, captioned with the quote: "There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the labour of real thinking." - Joshua Reynolds.

"What people do you want to help? Humanity? Or just this shitty country and the shitsheads who run it?"

"Look, you don't understand still, so first I'll tell you who we are." No, her eyes were definitely catching mine - off guard, suddenly, never too much at once, but every several seconds my brain would spark with instinctive reaction to eye contact and it'd already be over and I'd almost forget what I was thinking. "As you can even Google now, we were set up by the US and the Soviets. We existed off record. A couple generals on either side covered for us when the auditors came knocking. Then the Soviet Union stopped being a thing, and the US wanted to fold us into



something for NATO they never actually built. So instead we did what the other relics of the Cold War did - we privatized. We had one genius who was really good at making connections - getting full guest lists at Bilderberg and stuff and running down everyone on it like a door-to-door salesman. Most of our money, our gadgets and fancy shit comes from a few board members who really care about big X-risk scenarios but right now we're an open secret in certain circles, everyone wants a slice of us just to be in the game if it happens. Not who you're thinking of. People so rich you haven't heard of them.

I nodded. I rotated my hands, trying to figure out what my wrists were in; they were behind my back and all I could tell was I couldn't move them at all or feel anything in them.

"But that's not what I'm talking about. We've been checking in on your ex. They seem to be struggling a lot. We can help them."

I had been breathing in and out slowly to avoid giving any sign of response, and at this I almost stumbled, but Halation kept me going. "What are you asking for." Still, those words flowed from my mouth faster than I would have liked. I wasn't giving in; I just wanted to know





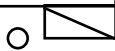
their terms, know exactly what I was negotiating around. And giving the impression of weakness wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"As you yourself put it, we're in a unique position. So we could ask for anything we want - or we might as well at least try. By the way, those people who run the world I was talking about? Some of them are listening in right now. Some of them" - she tapped an earpiece - "can even talk to me, if they want. So you're not just talking to me. Think about who you want to appeal to."

"You know, I've always dreamed of sitting down to talk to the people who run this world, as the representative of another one."

"No you haven't. That's something she dreamed of. I have the Facebook status. You dreamed of leading an army and razing it all to the ground. Your comment on that status refers to - let me check here - 'teabagging their corpses'. So at the moment the board isn't inclined to give your leash a lot of slack."

I smiled awkwardly, like an embarrassed anime girl, disarming. What was the point, when I was going to bring out my own big guns in a few minutes? Was I still



flinching away from the commitment I needed? Halation, if I flinch, you don't yield, and if you flinch, I won't yield. Neither of us are doing this for each other. That's the deal - that's how we'll win.

"OK. So you want to know what I have to offer. What we have - you're not just negotiating with one person either. Their name is Halation, by the way. Well, that ship is just the beginning. It works by breaking Lorenz equilibrium. Almost every technical problem humanity is stuck at explodes if you can do that. Of course you have to be incredibly careful about it. Not like we've done with carbon, or even nuclear, or anything. Or should I say, like you guys have done."

"Oh. Names. I'm sorry, I should have offered." The way she was looking into my eyes - definitely this time, not ambushing or evading - wasn't meant for me, I could tell, but for Halation. "I'm Caroline Bennett-Fog. Strategic consultant at Edison Lens."

Then her eyes rolled back, and she tapped her knuckles with the pen more violently for several seconds. She spoke next with a groan: "Identity redacted wants to know... what you'd value the technology you're offering at. In USD."



I blinked. I allowed myself to react genuinely just to derail this entire train of thought as quickly as possible. “I... have no idea. How would you even measure that.”

She waited again, one finger resting on her ear-piece. “...he says an estimate. Look, this isn’t going to work. You know this kid’s literally a communist, right?”

Surprisingly, I found Halation taking over for me. “What would you value this entire planet’s economy at. Let’s say ten times that, very conservative lower bound.”

Bennett-Fog blinked this time. “Well, you heard her. Don’t take it at face value, I have no idea where that estimate comes from.” She narrowed her eyes, though they still looked unfocused. “Personally, the stakes I’m interested in are less profit, more existential. It’s not about the bigger number, it’s zero-sum. And even though we sold out, there’s still a few people listening in who think that way too.”

“War. As a matter of fact I was going to get to that.”

“I want you to know that if anything you’re telling us isn’t the truth - if it gets us ambushed by an alien fleet



or eaten by nanotech or whatever the hell else, if there's a chance we could have had a week to prepare you didn't give us - we can make not just your life hell in ways you couldn't imagine. We can make her life hell in ways she couldn't imagine, and I think you have some idea of what a high upper bound that is. We don't want that, but it is a possible outcome."

"How are you going to do that if you're eaten by nanotech? If she is? And I think that alone should tell you we're not interested in recreating War of the Worlds. If we were I'd have left Halation to die - they couldn't have survived without me. I hate this world, but getting Space Columbus'd sounds about as fun as getting regular Columbus'd. I'm a principled anti-imperialist. I'm sure your bio will show that."

Bennett-Fog flipped through a parcel of printer paper she had under her notepad. Perfunctorily, as if to make it seem like she hadn't actually memorized it all. I wondered idly what was on there. Who hadn't? Every edgelord's social media presence, ultimately, was curated for none other than the three-letter agent we knew would be reading more thoroughly than any of our friends, even our enemies. "Well... it shows that after a pronounced stint





in first year undergrad. Remember the ‘Belt and Road as Worldwide Equator of Justice’ Facebook group?”

“Yeah, that was before I met Mai. And before they started banning gay shit.”

“In that case, I assume you’re also skeptical about helping us strike first.”

“No shit. But look, I do have an offer -“

“You don’t have anything. You don’t exist any more. This isn’t a fucking casino.”

“You’re talking to the wrong person.” We had considered whether I should adopt a different voice for Halation, whether they could do something with my vocal cords that only an alien could do like when I sang in Ahasurunu to the spaceship, but had concluded the ambiguity was best to keep them on their toes. “I exist because right now I’m the most important thing in your world. I won’t co-operate in any threat to the rest of the galaxy, even if you make her.”

“So why don’t we just get rid of her and talk to you directly.”



"This is the other thing you need to understand. I'm not leaving her. Any deal you make with me, she has to be involved in."

"We've come to understand that you need to leave her, periodically, to even survive on this planet."

"Yeah but you can't talk to me when I'm like that. I have to go inside someone to even be capable of producing your language. And I'm not going in anyone other than her - unless she directs me."

"Are there ways we can learn your language. When you talked to the ship, you were... singing. We have an entire office of cryptographers working on it."

Halation laughed drily. There was something weirder about someone else laughing through me than even someone else talking to me. And Halation was, right now, someone else. They were someone else, I think, even to themselves. "You picked literally the worst language in the universe to decode. I don't know what human cryptography is like but computational life trained on multi-million-year datasets can't crack Ahasurunu."

"Computational life."





"You're not quite there, but..." Halation paused to read some memories I'd forgotten I even had of debating with the rationalist-adjacent Comp Sci kid in the Coven of Domnu. "Oh you have some pretty bad superstitions about computational life huh. They're not as scary as you think - and I say this as someone who has more reason to hold a grudge against them than almost anyone."

Bennett-Fog flipped over to another page of the notebook and scratched something down. "I'll try not to go on tangents but there's clearly a lot to cover. How much, given what we've established of your situation, would you be willing to tell us about the rest of the universe - computational life, space travel, military capacities, political entities, economic activity?"

"It depends what guarantees we can secure about how you'll engage with them. Those are also all extremely varied."

"And supposing we didn't give you any." She flipped the notebook shut. A vein bulged barely noticeably in her forehead, but there wasn't much to notice. "You need us to even survive right now. What would you be willing to tell us to make sure we're interested."



“All your shareholders wanna sign off on risking that? You don’t know how long it takes to prove I’m telling the truth about anything. You don’t know how to monitor my vital signs. You think it would be a hard choice for me, but it’s easy. I don’t understand how a planet that’s been at war for so long produced so many cowards, but that’s not how it is in the rest of the universe. I’m cornered here. I have nothing but bad options, unless we can agree to a better one. As bad as you could ruin this, I could ruin it way worse if I let you guys loose on the universe.”

“I’m not sure what she’s told you humans are like...” Bennett-Fog adjusted her short but bushy eyebrows. “But are you sure you want to trust her? If we are like that? Don’t you want to go in someone else’s brain, and see what it looks like through their eyes? Seeing through someone’s eyes, walking in their shoes - those are human idioms that unlike your species, we don’t get the chance to do literally. They’re metaphors for empathy. Empathy is very important to us humans. We’re loving, family creatures. Lifetime pair-bonders.” Her voice betrayed a hint of wistfulness and a hint of disdain - even with whatever interrogation training she obviously had she couldn’t convince herself to believe this, although maybe that was part of what she wanted to communicate too.



"I've seen what your family looks like."

"Have you? There are lots of counterexamples. My own family..." She stopped.

I reached out my hand. Or Halation did. "Do you want me to look?"

She paused. Laid her rounded wrist on the table, clenching and unclenching her knuckles.

As the multicoloured liquid raced down my arm, she pulled it away. "Too much confidential information in there. Not just mine. We can bring people in, you know? Grab a random person off the street, just so you know you're not being like... brainwashed in there. We're parked at a gas station again."

"Could I go to the gas station and get a drink?" I butted in. My throat was dry as hell.

"No, you're not leaving, but we could get you something. You haven't eaten in longer than you've drank. They sell hot dogs. And I think maybe breakfast sandwiches."

I nodded. "Sure."



As she dialed someone on a walkie-talkie, Halation returned to the fore. “Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to confirm some basic facts about your world, about the people you’re working for and why they’re important, a few of which you’ve already confirmed for me. I really doubt you’d be able to deny any of them and have a realistic negotiating position. That said, I’ll have lots of chances to talk to other humans, and maybe even commune with them, if we get a good deal out of this. None of this changes my basic position here. I’m doing this for my own safety and my own advantage. If you can just put me in whatever body you want, share the information in my mind with whatever human you want...”

Bennett-Fog, putting down her walkie-talkie, nodded. Placed her hand on the books in front of her, almost as if she was about to swear an oath. “The basic condition of first contact is distrust. I’m aware of this.”

“Right. For you, at least. For me, it’s different. I trust Leona. I know her inside and out, know parts of her she didn’t know herself before a few days ago. Even then I don’t necessarily know what she’s going to do, what pressure she’ll break under or what decisions she’ll make or what idea she’ll come up with next, who or what she loves



most in the world. She doesn't know that either; it's not decided yet. But I trust the Leona that'll make those decisions, and I will only communicate with Earth through her. Those are my conditions, and we're both prepared to accept the consequences of them."

"Trusting Leona got you here. To be fair, this is just about the safest place on the planet for you, and we're about the nicest people who would ever detain you. But are you sure that's a good idea?"

"When she turned around and dragged me back to my ship, I was sure."

"OK. Well, being stuck to a human means you're stuck to human weaknesses. Food. Sex. Pain. We're not sure how your mind-meld works exactly but" - she looked down at her notes again - "if our guess is correct, she retains a good deal of the knowledge you share with us. So we wouldn't need to get anything out of you anyway. In fact, if the arrangement between you two is what you're saying it is, it might be better to just separate you from her and deal with her one on one. If there's a way to communicate with the rest of your people directly, she can teach us. If not, we can figure out from her whether we even want to."



“What are you talking about. The only way she’d understand to communicate with us is to have one of us in one of you. I’m the only one of us willing to go in one of you.”

“So, you remember that thing we did to” - she pulled a Post-It Note off the edge of one of the papers - “Cloud-skater. If Leona doesn’t cooperate we could give her that formula. It probably wouldn’t do anything to you because your biochemistry is so different - we can show you the formula to make sure - but you’d be stuck in there with her, unless you felt like coming out.”

“I wouldn’t mind going feral. Looks fun. Might not be for you guys.”

“It’s a steroid, by the way. Synthesized partly from testosterone. It also feels very similar to a panic attack.”

...oh, fuck you. On both counts. I poked Hala-tion to buy time while I calmed my body down, but they





responded in clear words: I think she wants to hear from you on this. I don't think it'll work unless you talk next.

"You know they can do things while they're inside me. Mess around with my brain signals to counter what you're doing, to some extent. Kill me, if it comes down to that."

"And you're happy to just live with something that'll kill you for its own reasons whenever it's convenient, inside you, for the rest of your life?"

"It's not 'whenever it's convenient'. I'm sure they'd only do that if there was no better option. In fact, I'm not even sure they'd do it then. But we're in a pretty bad situation, right? That's what you keep impressing on us."

"Well, no, it's not what I'm trying to..."



I grinned and leaned in, chin almost dragging on the table. "You can offer me whatever, that doesn't change that, as you put it, my life is over. And you're right that I don't have a strong negotiating position - I only really have one way to get what I want. So I'm ready to die at the drop of a hat. Or just sit here with my pain receptors fried watching alien anime in my head, which is more likely. Really, it's Halation's willingness to die that's more commendable."

"Well, maybe they just have less to lose. They're stranded on a planet with as little reason to trust them as they have to trust us. You're one of us. You're an Earthling. You know what Earth's atmosphere feels like on a nice sunny day. You know what relaxing in a pretty girl's arms feels like. No matter how alienated you are from the kind of people you grew up with, the kind of people I work for, even people like me, you have more in common with us than with... Halation. You're the one with something to lose. Like... any body you ever wanted." She paused just to let this one sink in, and I squirmed inside. I hadn't expected it to hit me that hard. Like I said, I'm the kind of trans girl who's still never had a good relationship with my body





and didn't even go into the experiment really expecting to, I always thought of it as more of a futile, defiant act of rebellion. Dying alone in here - stopping a reprise of the Columbian tragedy for a whole galaxy by being forgotten by the universe itself, retreating into a world of artificial beauty woven by an incomprehensible being who had descended from heaven to communicate with me in a way I had never been able to with anything else - would have been all the more perfect a Promethean end. But maybe, what if there was a chance I would lose to have a normal body, not anyone else's normal but my own, that I could have felt at home in because I made it and taught it how to be at home with me? That terrible fear drove into me that I wasn't playing to lose head-on, like I had been when I ran up to the truck, pretending I could commandeer it and letting myself get captured gracefully. I was playing for keeps. I was playing for worse-than-death.

“Or if that's not altruistic enough for you or some thing. Like, with a tiny royalty from those technologies if the estimate you gave us was accurate would be enough to end world hunger - yourself - without overthrowing our system, without even upsetting it enough that they'd try to stop you. Do you think Mai would disapprove of you giving in for the sake of feeding people? Did you ever read that



Olivia Butler she lent you?"

"You don't understand. No matter what I have to lose, Halation still has way more to lose than I do. In a battle of wills between us, I'll lose. They have more at stake here than either of us, and not only that, they're the ones who have something to ask you. This isn't a negotiation between you and me, ignore me in all this. My life was over when I let this - visitor in."

"Is it an ask or a demand?"

One of her eyebrows twitched in a way that reminded me of pressing "GO" on a recorder.

"What do you mean?"

"What position of power do you think you're making it from? We want it to be an ask, a petition, because we want to be in the position of power, and however much you think otherwise, Leona, you want us to be too, and we want you to help us with that. No matter how good you think communism or whatever is, we want you to understand that's not what aliens in a position of power would be like. It would be a world so alien, so foreign to any sort of value you can conceive of, it would be like hell.



Like living in a salvia nightmare.”

I felt like I was starting to psych them out, not the other way around. Halation was rallying within me and ready to take over if I gave them the upper hand. “Who cares? Just let them explain what they’re here for and figure out the power stuff later. You always see that in everything but it’s nothing. Not right now. Neither of us are in a position anyone’s ever been in before. Each of us have things at stake no one’s ever had at stake in history.” I tried to stand up, tried to make a pose slamming my finger down on the table, but of course I couldn’t because I couldn’t move my hands and they were hooked under the chair, so I just wiggled dramatically. “We don’t even know how to figure out the power stuff here, so let’s just talk.”

She briefly vibrated her head in a small unconscious way that ruffled her short-cropped hair. It was actually a shockingly cute gesture on the ugly face. “All right. It gives you an opportunity to manipulate me. But you seem like an idiot. So why not. Her eyes brightened. “We have a room prepared for Halation’s individual body, much more comfortable than what you were keeping them in - if there’s anything they need in there besides atmosphere - favourite foods we can synthesize, temperature or



radiation conditions, just let us know - or her. Our planet also values hospitality."

"Tell that to the kids in refugee camps, the people whose hospitality your ancestors repaid with smallpox blankets, the lineups at every border" - This wasn't me snapping, it was Halation, although I assumed there was no way they could tell.

"I'd be fascinated to know how these issues are dealt with in the rest of the galaxy. How you'd deal with one of us, if we crash-landed among your stars, completely defenseless, relying on an interpreter you don't exactly trust. That said, we at Edison Lens don't really have anything to do with any of that."

"So how would you feel about changing it?"

What spread across her face, which widened like a clay pot melting, was a sort of smirk of excitement, stretching even the lines around her eyes. "Are you talking to me? Or my backers? Or the whole world? And which one of you is talking? You understand, right, that half the problems you're describing stem from the expansion of an alien set of values over a people who don't share them?"



"I'm not expanding anything. Like I said, I won't do anything that doesn't go through her. And she won't do anything that doesn't go through the will of humanity."

"Well, I don't know if you have any silly fantasies of getting everyone to vote or what, but that's us." When she said "us" - I was still groggy - I could have sworn I could see the swarm of gazes writhing around her, the eyes behind her eyes, the flows of energy and capital through the astral bodies of the ones speaking through her. We are Legion. I felt like this was the alien we were both contacting. "Our board of directors represents the greatest accumulation of resources in a single group of people in history. We have been granted authority by all the superpowers the blood and sacrifice of all the world's conflict has culminated in - the United States, Russia, China, the European Union. Anything you want - yes - goes through us."

When I woke up Caroline Bennett-Fog was gone. There were no clocks and no outside light; I had no idea what time it was, what day it was. I must have waited for at least an hour.



When I next opened my mind she was back, holding a canister of Soylent, screwing and unscrewing the cap absent-mindedly.

“Come outside.”

I didn’t respond as fast as either of us probably expected to. What did “outside” even mean any more? I had settled in here for the long haul, I had made myself at home. I had thrown away my expectations. I had been dreaming vividly, continuing to project them in front of my open eyes.

She tapped a fob against what looked like a random spot on the back wall and slid it aside. At the same time I found I could move my feet, which were individually (now) in little white plastic spheres that closed around my ankles. (My hands, which I assumed were in something similar, didn’t become any more mobile behind my back.) It led into a narrow, poorly lit plastic hallway, with doors in either side. The door on the right opened onto light. I stepped out into an overexposed afternoon, a shoulder of the road with soft, grainy dirt mixed with larger pebbles, falling off into a ditch under the shade of leaves that looked white-yellow in the bombardment of sun.





“Are we...”

“Still at the gas station.” Caroline disappeared around the front of the truck.

A couple of guys I recognized - the black guy from the shack, still in his Men In Black suit, and the Pi Day guy, this time in a T-shirt that parodied the E.T. poster with an Among Us spaceman, were standing around talking by the doors of the gas station. The nerd was sucking on a rocket popsicle while wearing the Men In Black guy's sunglasses. Thin eyebrows riding ridges of fat pulled his eyes up over their fallen edges to look at us, but they didn't say anything. The Men In Black guy waved with a smirk.

I half expected to get looks wearing these weird handcuffs but with this truck here for who knew how long, the side-shave-mulleted, pointy-faced, baggy-eyed cashier had probably gotten the idea something was up already. I pointed out a breakfast sandwich from the open refrigerator and a pink Monster - I usually went for a less intense flavour, but I needed something to last me the next absence. Caroline picked them up for me.

“I don't know how much of Earth she's shown



you,” Caroline sidled up to me, not getting anything for herself, still fidgeting with her Soylent with my meal in a plastic bag over her wrist. “I assume you’ve seen a gas station. Maybe you’ve seen a grocery store? There was a very powerful empire whose leader more or less surrendered to us when he saw one of our grocery stores. But I don’t know how much the concept is even legible to you. Now that I think of it, I haven’t seen that much of Earth. I’ve put so much less effort into it than I would if I was an alien visiting a new planet for the first time. Although I don’t know if for an interplanetary civilization we’re particularly unusual.”

“You are in a lot of ways.” I was pretending to be Halation, who seemed to be still sleeping at the moment. “Not a lot of stars or planets this size - very rare medium. Thin, placid climate.”

“My point is, it occurs to me I wouldn’t be a very convincing tour guide to the planet, since I’ve taken it for granted myself. I’ve travelled a fair bit with Edison’s Lens - been on four continents, which is better than most people - but I don’t really take the time on my own. And I tend to stick to familiar sights and routines when I do. You don’t want anyone too xenophilic for a first contact.





Not on the home team, at least. You, on the other hand... There's so much to see if you're willing to convince us you're safe. I don't know how much Leona would think to show you."

"They can ask," I replied coldly, focusing on a flickering light-panel as I waited for her at the counter.

As we walked back towards the truck, I could feel Halation stirring and somehow, the second I did, Caroline turned back and looked me in the eyes. Holding out my food, she said "You didn't try to escape."

"Where am I gonna go."

"I don't know. Where did you think you were going in the first place? But you really do seem to have changed your strategy."

It legitimately hadn't occurred to me, and Halation hadn't been there to consult with. But yeah. I could have probably sent them running down my body and into the ditch and into the woods and... they could have found Jax? Or Leeroy Jenkins'd back into the truck to try and get to their ship? Or...



"You couldn't have. We've figured out how to get the ship to do its field thing stably."

Halation yelped. "You're not supposed to do it stably! Not without moving, which is what it wants to do, and not without a proper probabilistic packet command for a trajectory! It doesn't want that! Are you bombarding it with those permanent frequencies again?"

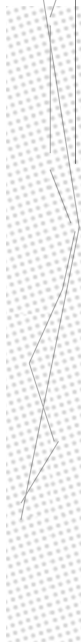
"It's been stable for over a day."

Over a day... how long had I slept... probably as long as they wanted me to.

"That convinced the last of my backers you're willing to cooperate. To me it's not a solid proof but I wanted to hear you out anyway. What are your demands. If you don't say them now you may not get to say them again."

I gulped.

"At the moment, the galaxy is at war - your uncontacted planet is outside the scope of the conflict, and no one will seek to press you in against your consent - at least, not yet. Maybe if they find out about the kinds of things





you're hiding on this planet, someone will grab you for their side before we do, someone less willing to negotiate. But it's not irrelevant to you - the war is over a technology called the Causal Adipose that threatens the integrity of the universe itself. We need your help - my faction wants to force a peace as soon as possible, and resume research on technology that would control the Adipose's spread. We are willing to share our technologies with you, starting with the Weak Asymmetry Field, which would allow you to start building a space fleet, in exchange for your alliance in this war."

Bennett-Fog dropped her arms to her sides, the plastic bag twisting and bouncing against her dramatic hips. "What are the risks. Which side has the advantage. If they have technology worth ten times our entire planet too, what are we, cannon fodder?"

"Less of that technology than you expect" - I didn't want to overstate this, I didn't want to trail blood in the water in front of sharks, but it was an unavoidable part of what made our offer rational in the first place - "is military. We haven't fought like this in millennia - that's part of why it's so bad. It's like World War 1 out there - but on hundreds of planets, trillions of lives." I switched back



to Leona. "I'm - Halation is... Halation really wants to do this, we wouldn't have even risked getting captured if they could let this war keep going any longer. As bad as the risk of introducing you to the rest of the galaxy, it's worth it if anything could weigh on the scales just enough."

Bennett-Fog smirked as if she'd gotten a bite on her line. "I thought you said you were a principled anti-imperialist."

"I am. That's why we have no intention of letting this turn into an imperialist expedition. And to ensure that, I want Leona Lillywhite, as sole mediator between Earth and Contemplation, and thus Earth and the Anti-Adipose Alliance, to lead the Earth Expeditionary Force. Which will be an entirely new military body, with no national allegiance detracting from this loyalty."

"Are you... kidding?"

She laughed dramatically for several seconds, leaning back almost onto the hood of the truck. Fat boobs spilling backwards under white shirt. I had to will myself to understand it as performance. Everything was here. Nothing was true and everything was possible. "No."



Caroline Bennett-Fog closed her eyes and started to walk around the engine to the other side of the truck, leaning away from me to listen to her headpiece. I stood there.

She had wandered off close to the edge of a picnic table a few metres away from the front of the truck when she beckoned me over.

“Are you even,” she began when I got close enough, “politically important on your planet? Why do you think they’re going to go along with this?”

“I’m...” this was the first time I had heard this. I hadn’t even thought of it in our planning, fuck I’m gonna have to get good at this, are you sure you want this, “something of a celebrity, particularly for my cause. I’m one of the last survivors of a peaceful scientific project that was martyred, drawing us into the war, and I’ve been a fugitive across the universe for several decades, leading me here. We have faster-than-light transport but not instantaneous telecommunication - that’s one of the things the Adipose does - so it would take a huge expenditure of resources for Contemplation authorities to come negotiate with you themselves, and it would be immensely unpopular to go behind my back. They trust me more than they trust any of



you, too.”

Caroline wandered over to the picnic table as I spoke and sat down. “Look, I assume she’s told you about the history of this continent. Letting... trust, in any form, determine the outcome of a first contact is misguided.” Her earpiece buzzed. “Let me handle this!” She gestured across the half-stripped planks of the table to the opposite seat.

I followed in starts. I had to sit down carefully without the option to stabilize myself with my hands. As she noticed my difficulty, Bennett-Fog pulled out something that looked like a car key and unlocked my remaining cuffs. “Well, if you think that, I simply won’t trust you. So now, what do you have to lose? Ten times the GDP of Earth, at least. What do I have to lose? Eternal infamy for introducing American imperialism to the cosmos and a boring life arrest?”

Now she was talking to Halation. To the being she herself had only seemed to be able to trust through me. “Your chance to get home safe and sound, in your normal form, guaranteed protection from any military action ever undertaken by Earth, with an accompanying detachment of the newly formed Earth Expeditionary Force, to com-





municate with your leaders directly. And a signed - we'll figure out how this works - agreement to never contact Leona Lillywhite."

The earpiece buzzed again. "Shut up!" She dropped the edges of her hands on the table. She was trembling. "There are lots of ways to do this without the stupid part. Forming a united Earth military force has been... we've had draft proposals for it since the 70s. It's the north star of our charter."

"You think I would entrust this war to people who fantasized about it?"

- Uhhhh, Halation.

I have some bad news. I assumed you already knew about my childhood fantasies.

- *It's okay.*

"What happens after she dies? I could imagine this happening... rather quickly." The other two men, still in front of the glass doors of the gas station, swayed like mirages.

"She picks her successor, I guess. And transfers



me publicly - so there's no ambiguity that I consented to the pick. You won't find me as quick to die, not within your generations."

"You'd be surprised how long humanity is willing to wait."

"Well you'd be surprised what we can do while you're waiting."

This was a power Halation had never projected within me. Had never projected towards anyone in their memories. They had been born for a quiet life. Even as an interstellar refugee they had sent letters, wistful and supportive and defiant, across light years at allied computational-life relay stations to a small legion of outraged, mostly uncomfortably nationalistic followers. They had pulled this power directly out of the situation, even more than I had. I felt a strange vicarious pride.

"Eat your lunch. I think we are going to have to pause the negotiation to consider what we've established here, but I have a number of further nuts-and-bolts questions I need to ask you before anyone can make any kind of reasonable decision, and we clearly need some clarity on what positions we're asking each other questions from."



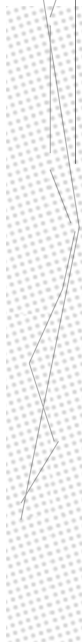
You should also... sleep on it. One more thing. You aren't used to war, I get it. So I'll let you in on something we know here. People like her don't win wars. She's been fighting the losing side of a centuries-long war her entire life, and hasn't done the slightest thing to turn the tide."

"Give us humans who do."





2
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VCCNM2VM
MPECENV2
GILNEBVV
COMWODO
B12N2
EUVV1D4
NIVICE2
23E
202FENDI
1B2NM
0N12
VGI0N4
WVENV
DOTOVE
E1
TUVOVE
M1N1
IMCIDIDN
LENLOB
E102MOD
2ED DO
WE EGIL
VDIB12CI
1NV
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOTOV
1B2NM
TOVEN





by: rumour hell

Name: cammy

Birthday: 3,074.3.57 HP

Occupation: hackergurl

Sex: female

Blood type: a-

Likes: a good mem trade, life-fash, ghost sunlight

Dislikes: juicebox moons

Seen with: the neuroxia in all eyes



"I mean, what do you really find? Is it trouble for the rest of your life or is it the end of the rainbow? Do you dare to actually open the treasure box?" He turned his hands palms up and shook his head

she'd sent a venter, harmless, spooled in motley violet and it had coursed

- in a radiance stolen from the loner, she'd thought,



the one fixtured as a stalker slanting from the lowest plane

and he'd seen, ignored & now of course was thinking over
what it meant.

not her true feelings, he'd thought, double checked that
thought, her thought, over.

over & again.

but she'd already been out, been gone, or it was gonna
happen that way, the way their molting had laid it out, a
half-decaled chronosis ago, or were the fibers

truer and bluer? by which she'd meant that sickly blue
blemish, the pale, streaking glaze of wizened tendon or
carc'ed teeth.

and we have, she thinks, not much time left to keep going
steady, and thank these angel echoes for that. echoed to
where we only see them as our own dreams, and not our
good dreams, and only sketched out and taken shape in
our angst.

and it would hurt to be released from his trust, but she'd



released him from hers, long ago. who keeps going that way? some do, and some must hurt, hurt themselves keeping it displaced like that, about a thousand bytes of it each time, severed only by the break of jawline

-while you think it over-

and say no fault, i am faultless here, and you say that with your silence, don't you?

but he says it with smoke now, clouding her out, dark clouds over her as she traipses through that outside.

hint of rain nuzzles her hair through her hood, meaning stronger than it feels. flame auricked lacing of her hair glued against and into banded nylon heavy with damp, in more obeisance to gravity, she can feel it, even so.

but no curl strings her eyes yet.

and all the fash and trend swims by her, in no way is she swimming through it. plaited clothes strung by the sleeve,



skulls shorn seventy-five to twenty-five.

she could zone on this all day, has other concerns, could zone on this all day and that's unfair, something wired into the schema of her percepts and of course she can only blame herself for that.

but she doesn't want to, and where was she going?

her beater is still more dead than alive.

more dead than alive meaning, life enough.

so it wasn't that, she must have wanted something else.

but no, she thinks, couldn't be that, i am not wired that way,

and so she's wired herself out of it but still: dark clouds hanging heavy over her. patches on the pavecrete, blooming in shadow over lines ebbed and in some cases, shorted

in intent

if you think, she thinks, there is life enough here, i'll prove



you wrong, i'll make you care about it.

but only in hushed voices do they talk about Disillusion,
in whispers do they dare into what it means.

what is your problem, she hears someone say, its not a
good enough design? some poor loser must have shorted
his shit by a headpiece for that. such a waste of time, right?

too detailed, she thinks, too exact an assess of her assess,
and it that way she must have dreamed it, because she
doesn't think she was caught looking. all this time, she
thinks, i don't get caught looking & ...

it's others who need to worry about that.

get caught up in that shit and it'll play you for real.

and so she's skipping past that just to focus on the shad-
ows, blooming like algae clusters, she thinks, some lonely
place past the 'wave that's all ocean.

the clusters themselves are cold & dry, sleek where not
bittered by age and other people's issues.



her beater, had she left it on? it would be draining now, draining its brightness into the world. the world through the black floor, through the white walls she's never been able to poster up.

when its done it would sleep, she'd set it that way, sleep on the verge of its death,

sleep through its death that way, and that would hit her the next time she logged in, because she wants, she's told herself, to age out through it.

no breath she breathes out through it, and she's at Tachae's anyway, and it's boarded up the way it always is.

if she wanted to she could face the darkness that seeps out between the slabs of spiral-grained wood. bolted in chrome-finished iron. sparks of rust blood the ovalled tips.

go inside, see if anyone's there.

if she wanted to. .





Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIGISI
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2
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Last Time

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CW: misogyny, body horror, private parts, reality distortion

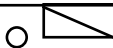
(Δ)

HOME

It's all treehouse-deprived, diy sweater chokers, asymmetric workouts, tetanus nail culture, Cammy thinks as she watches pastel shades of skin walk by. Jewel will always keep her watching these freak shows, because some part of him, conscious or otherwise, just wants to troll her into submission. A pre-emptive strike and paranoid because she's never shown any feelings for him that stray from the beaten line.

This culture is not for her and he's making her live it, with her dirty hair pinned behind a pullover hood that she's not sure is even her. It's stupid because yeah, if you look at it one way, it's her problem. If you look at it another way, it's his. It's not valid for him to troll her over it, and right

HOPE MY RAINS LEAVE A STAIN (Δ)



as she decides that she's gonna leave and let him stew until he's ready to play fair, he saunters out of the crowd with his stupid braided goatee and his stupid not-too-radical tee and a look that says the Tri-Sun overhead is just for him.

It isn't though, and it's not for these other dimensional refugees. It's for the Velih, and whenever he wears that look she wants to scream, isn't this ghetto enough for you? She wants to scream it loud and hard until her lungs burst. Burst and fill blood and that's what's she's breathing, pumping blood into her lungs until that's all she can feel.

Wants to grab him by his skinny shoulders but she just stands there stupid as he walks up to her. He tells her the passcode, always a short greeting so no one can tell they're exchanging vitals. It's "ayo," today, three letters that whiten her synapses with anger like permafrost.

Today isn't the day she finally decks him one for years of intangibility. She's been trolled again, she realizes, right as she was about to give it up. It's like he knows her threshold to the exact measurement, like he knows her well, or something.



He's soft spoken to a nervy tic, and the "ayo" flutters from his lips to hers like a butterfly with its feelers out. Strands tickling the breeze. She wants to close her hand over it and crush it to death and maybe tear the wings off, but she can't do anything either.

All she can do is start walking home, past the camouflaged storefronts and deep Velih state sleeper vagrants. The plastered handbills in the katakana, the refuge from those not interested enough to mentally translate, announcing ambrosaic all nighters and schizophrenia spam sessions. She's always wanted to try the second but every time she meets with Jewel she knows the true way of seeing is that you will always find yourself on the path home, no matter if you don't want to be.

She wonders if that will bury her, if when she is buried she will think, this isn't home. Home is where I was.

Home is through alleys overwashed with flowing patterns of shaded triangles. Home is past someone smoking a cig more fire than dart in torn pants tactically revealing closed loop visual tattoos. Home is only seeing a sliver of the Tri-Sun here and there as you dig deeper into the Clusters.

Home is a room behind a door that's only there when she



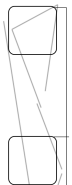
wants it to be. It materializes on a wall painted over with a girl pulling apart her buttcheeks to reveal an eye, sliver pupilled like a cat's. The new street art wave of misogynistic philosophy that says girls are only good for looking at you.

She thinks when she isn't looking Jewel goes out and tags himself into a stupor. At her most paranoid she thinks he's the one that tagged over her door, and at her least paranoid she thinks there's a nonzero chance.

Home is the laptop she got in exchange for a kiss her memory has sunken deep in the gradient. Home is the only website she ever visits, flickering onto her screen with the Velih's hyper-weird system of urls from obscure pulled languages. Home is a walled in room with these things and a waterbed that's survived the wax of a decade. It's the same water, has been, but her sleep, her dreaming patterns, have changed.

Reality no longer meets them even halfway.

Home is these walls, too thin so she's breathing the Velih air outside. She struggles with each first morning breath,





getting it into her lungs, and she can tell her brain stalls out on it. When it sets off the blood plume, she has the strength to slide from the seasoned slab but even then her feet are blistered by needles of cold.

Home is that there's a whole dimension to explore and all she's ever known is this ghetto.

Home is that they don't deserve more.

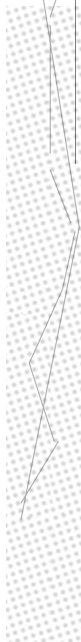
Home is that all paths loop back to the centre, even the paths she finds through the Loum. They think the Loum has developed consciousness anywhere under the Tri-Sun, and she believes that. She believes with consciousness it's developed need. The need to be accessed, the need to be touched.

The Loum is made of pathways through life. She and Jewel work from different ends to find the pathways that are solutions.

But if she thinks far back enough, all her problems come from pathways too, and she never picked these pathways under the Tri-Sun. They all come from the Loum. They are all strands woven into a tangle, and it's only when she holds them apart, untwined and held by her slender fin-



gers, that she knows how much it's all been a waste of time.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
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VCCNM2WM
WPECENW2
GTLNBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N11BICE2
23E
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1B2NW
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VR10N4
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1WCID1D0
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E102WOD
2ED DO
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211
DOTOB
1B2NW
TOWEN



RABANADAS

Jewel is already on the Loum by the time she logs in. This creeps her out but honestly she'd rather he be there than anywhere under the Tri-Sun. Jewel is all ego masking as deep sorrow, like some kind of virus perfectly attuned to the Velih thoughtflow that reaches for meaning with a grasping hand but finds only bird wings. Tears them, collects and forgets them as they're collected. She can see his presence in the haze, the sharp images of his chosen symbolic meaning and the blurs of what he gives away.

Jewel was an architect of the Loum and she knows he built it so that what you give away blurs. If you could see his clearly it'd be hideous. She's seen other patchworks of molted skeining, and they were more honest, though probably down to a lack of weaving skill.

Everyone thinks the Velih bind their tangles tighter than footwraps, but sometimes she can't shake the feeling that they are just that pure, and the Clusters are existentially necessary so they don't get defiled by the human refugees. She's wondered long about what it would mean if they figured enough of the code thread to see the foundations of it. See if it was woven at all, if the Velih didn't invent weaving. Their beautiful tangle was there for them the mo-



ment they opened their eyes. Sometimes she thinks she'd be the only person not surprised. The refugees would have coronaries. She thinks they only try so hard to look weird because deep down they think purity is impossible.

But the Loum is brilliant today. Almost too brilliant because they need focus to get out of this. The spacial geometry is all fractals, sharp edges slanting to parallel then parallax with each other. The colours run, losing base to brightness in gradient flows. Lines paling to frost represent the Loum's most vivid threads. These are the logically connected thoughts, the pathways that if followed will result in some concrete change in external context.

She and Jewel started at different ends and met in the middle and they thought that meant there was purity there. They matched it to a leyline running under the Tri-Sun and followed it.

It took them to a ziplocked bag, pocket sized, space enough to fishcan-press two severed fingers. Inside it were two black pills, each marked with a hexagram, white lines as vivid as any paths in the skeinways. They both saw it at the same time. She knew because their eyes found each other and by the time they found the pills again they knew they were being watched. Not with the kind of eyes that see





skin. Eyes that see leylines, the threads that bind souls.

Velih eyes. What would they be doing, where the white thread had led them? What would they be seeing?

She wasn't sure. But she'd seen with her eyes Jewel's arm snake down. She'd seen his palm close over the bag, fingernails scrabbling on the gritted concrete, fingertips peeling slivers of skin.

She'd seen him take it and she'd seen him pull her back the way they came. She'd felt the eyes, burning into her, knew it was eyes because it was hotter than she'd ever felt the Tri-Sun. She could feel her cells blackening, just in the thought that something in it was tainting her. Then they were past neowave misogynistic thighs and eyes and lost in the crowd, waves of people bled together and into each other. Freakpsych oblivion in the glitter of hands and pierced extremities against kaleidoscopic shimmers of skin. All the death fash hurled out and over them.

He had pulled her into a corner store and into the back and she should have said no. She knew better than to alter her perceptions with a boy, especially with someone like Jewel. Knew it was what the neowaves wanted, for them to take drugs and see the waves as beautiful. But he took



one first, palming it, pooling spit in his mouth to choke it down.

And she had taken one too, and he had put fingers to his lips, kept them there for full seconds, and then he had backed down the aisle, vanished behind the freeze dried baby octopi and the wholesale rabanadas. She was left there, staring at the specialty board, not knowing whether to move, or what to do, only knowing that the eyes were somewhere out there. That they'd done something they shouldn't. She knew it deep in her bones.

Moments after that she knew those bones weren't real.

She knew that she was just sight. She was just sight and everything else, moving her around, and nothing stayed if you looked twice for it. She tried it on everything she saw, whipping her head back and just seeing void. The people were looking at her weird, then she'd look back and they were smiling warm, look back and they were furious, look back and they were so sad she couldn't understand it. Couldn't understand it because nothing was real so what was there to be sad over?

She reached up to feel her skull and there was nothing there. She moved her hands behind her eyes and didn't





feel anything. Saw all the food around and realized she could never eat again, if she wanted to, as long as no one knew she wasn't eating.

Knew the leylines weren't destiny, that they were just some nightmare of concretized blood vessels.

She had walked home, careful only to see things she wanted to see, and when her door had materialized on a tabula rasa blank wall, she had walked through it, and felt herself dissolve.

Without eyes that saw skin she simply wasn't, and never really had been.

She had opened her beater laptop and logged onto the Loum and in that moment she had known the truth of it.

The Loum was what had come first. It was the outside they had built around them, out of threads of fear because that was all they had to work with. They had built it themselves, the Clusters and the Tri-Sun and everything they told themselves they were seeing and feeling.

The Velih were just a name for eyes that would see who they really were. Just a name and a made up history and



everything that they could project onto something else. A something else that would be better than them because something had to be. A name and a history and something they could see if they looked for it.

If they didn't look for it would never be there. If they weren't so scared of the eyes they would never feel them.

She had known that, as clear as she thought she knew her skin. And it had worn off like a drug is supposed to wear off, and she remembered she believed in the leylines as things that were just there and you had to deal. Then she remembered she believed in reality as something that was just there and you had to deal. Remembered finally eyes as something that watched you and things that watched you had meaning.

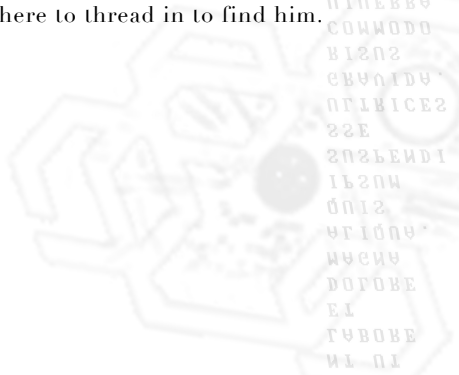
And the meaning she came to was that they'd stolen pills from the Velih, and the Velih had seen them do it.

She didn't know how to make it right, but that was where the Loum threads came in, the pathways she and Jewel would follow after under the Tri-Sun. Pathways gleaned in the Loum that would solve their problem, and she almost forgot, she told herself, that the problem started in the Core Skein in the first place.





When she'd opened her beater, this time the entropic
glyphia had told her where to thread in to find him.



LUCIFIGI
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2AM
NICEEN2
NICEEN2
COMMOD
BISN2
EBNIDW
NTRICE2
SSE
SUSLENDI
IBSNW
ONIS
NTRIDW
MCEW
DOGOVE
ET
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NI NI
INCIDIDN
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VDIBI2CI
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COM2ECIE
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DOGOB
IBSNW
GOBEN





‘CROSS THE BLUR

Jewel's lines were always fake, but at least, she thinks, as she swims in them, they were faked to look like something real. Something authentic that recognized their binds weren't binds at all, that if you looked at them long enough you knew the only glue to them was the thought of their binding.

So what are his lines? Direction, direction to something that changed you, or your context, or maybe both at once. A voice in the dark when you're stumbling and groping for light. Someone dishevelled in their wisdom, putting a cheap rate on guidance when you're confused.

She guesses that's what drew her to him, though a part of her doesn't want to see it that way, doesn't want to see herself as that stupid. They met in the Loum first, vibrations smushing together more lines than normal. Neither were happy, they found, and it's not because of the Clusters. They think the Clusters are a distraction. What makes them sinister is they make you think you would be happy if you weren't in them.

When she saw him under the Tri-Sun she was disappointed, yeah. But what else would he look like? He had to have





some haircut and some chin set up and it couldn't have been worse but it couldn't have been better either. Anyway she didn't want him to bone her. Too fast, never good enough. She just wanted to find some pathways that didn't leave her feeling like her time was being grated, peeling tender strips like it was always boneless.

Her lines now are wavy, almost 'cross the blur but that's impossible. The thread he's on is taut and dark and she looks for associations. She'll meet him in the middle of any thread just so they can be on the same page. He's got a braid so she's gotta untwine it and anything else comes second.

Knotted braids are choice tangles and untwining shows you the way forward. Her lines are bright but she can't see her own haze. She forgot her image a long time ago and was glad. It feels honest that she doesn't know it, even if she could check at any time.

The thread makes her nervous as she follows it. This is good and bad. Good because it means she's onto something and bad because everything is getting heavy now. She's starting to think that whatever is out there doesn't want them to be happy. That theory was like thriftcloth but now it's like armour rusted and stiff. When she finds



the knots she sighs in a relief that feels like opiates. She starts to untangle them, picking them apart with blades of thought and that's when she knows, looks up and sees it and it's real.

All the mote auras are eyes. The haze is eyes, shades of pupils, slivers of iris, baleful in the blurs. She finds the line again and looks all the way to Jewel and her reflection, rippling, glints off his aura. From within the aura, subsumed, and exhumed back at her, her outside ghost, swimming out at her as if breaking the surface of inky waters. .

She closes the lid on her beater and stares at her room. Her eyes rove around its walls while thoughts drift in her mind, not beating hard but not going away. All, she thinks, mirrors for the blank slate where she thought she'd had an inner storm.





THE PRIMACY

She stays like this. She doesn't ask, but Jewel starts getting her food.

The primacy has her stay alone. She can't help it. She knows her flesh needs aren't real anyway. They're a reality, but artificial, like sucrose. Gets in the blood the same way, quickens the heartbeat the same way, but bartered, she thinks, traded for with something. For this primacy she'd traded her safety out there, but her solitude, her sanctuary, her solace comes first.

She hears a knock outside and thinks she's hallucinating. She tries to imagine if she could hear someone's fist pounding the butteye. The brick might mute it, or maybe her room doesn't even exist before it laces through the butteye trying to meet her fingers.

She has to hear it three times before she bothers to look. The sunlight must flare outside, but that doesn't make it real. She pushes open the door, which scrapes against the ground with a cry. There are three boxes outside. They are parcel wrapped, brown paper with string drawn taught. She stacks them in her arms like a tower, the top of the third box reaching her chin. When she flits back inside,



drops the boxes, and pulls the door shut, she feels like she's become unreal again, and it feels good now, like she's safe.

She stretches out in the shadow like a cat, sits cross-legged in front of the boxes, and starts to untie them.

Baby octopi. Eight breaded and fried pieces, crusted a beige brown with shadow filled valleys of skin. Rabanadas. Three pieces of sweetbread. Soft white dough, trim film of cake, snowfall icing.

The three boxes are the same. She counts off knocks and eats them all, finishing each box before she moves to the next.

She lies on the ancient waterbed for hours or decades, and the water, caked into stillness, can only reflect and refract her barren walls.





GRIEFING

She opens her eyes to a door knock. She opens it to see another box.

She takes it, sits on the waterbed. Eats while catching all the crumbs of it in her sweatshirt. She spills them out to the floor, climbs onto the waterbed and pulls open the beater top.

The Loum is darker now, papered by grey veil. She follows it with her shade essence. Jewel is a mote somewhere past fold and tangle.

She keeps moving. The shadows of the Loum are like cobwebs. She feels their ripples, cold hands.

The Velih are somewhere out there.

She curls around the thread as she moves.

The thread is sticky with some kind of acid burn. Corrosion she feels as a ripple through her nervosa scanners, loaners from Jewel that she didn't feel right setting up on her beater in the first place.

Eventually she can feel Jewel's mote aura through them.



It's greyer even than the Loum.

She spins out her threshold to find him.

They're silent together. Almost eras until she gets paranoid he's grieving her.

What's up, she says. I was on it and then I was got deep. Was it you?

I'm not sure, he says. I keep forgetting. I've got those frayed wires, remember? Lot to keep track of.

It matters. She tinges this in a temperant bloom, choice unfurled through wisdom and it comes out provenance-filtered to show it might help both, if she knew. Because if it wasn't you it was the Velih.

That doesn't matter. He says this while his unstained empathy hits a snag, bleeding into game theory glyphica, the grey cope of entropic indifference spreading across his symbology like ink in water.

You may have noticed, she says, that it's all I care about. But the Loum has always been slowmode, and her last boost leaves her too dry to put any vehemence into it. Always, she thinks, I use it on my venters, and Jewel scripts





that always, every day, long as he wants.

Dude doesn't even need to unspool the reality five feet around me to make my problems not matter.

The Velih are just a gaze of the Aspected, he says. Like he'll tell her which apocrypha he pulled this from. That

hive whatever it is, looks but not back, you know? The one we need to worry about something called the Disseminating. We read, or glean, that this one was pure neuroxia, before it had the substance to shape itself.

I don't know about that, she says. Because whatever he's talking about doesn't sound like it should be her problem. What's bugging me is the Velih.

And a karmal backswell, she thinks, a price to pay but I won't know the format of it, until it's too late.

The bug, he says. I've figured that one out. It's knowing something is indexing everything you do. When the hormones hit you put two and two together that no one ever reads this index. The neurosal tar that keeps the index we gave shape to in the Velih, and when we named it, called it out, it got different.



But the Velih gave us their moltings so we could get deep enough into ourselves to hack our neurosis out, she says. Why would they want to tune in to watch people like them? That's why no one here cares how they look or what they're doing. Nobody but you, she's about to add, but he's put a minute of silence on her, one she hopes is worth it for what she'll say when his strings aren't all over her spine.

Most archivists, he says, mistranslate it. That's the one we got here. But if you check out the Interwave, you see a lot of critical tags left at the door. I read them. There are a lot of ways to see it. But one tag came from someone who bothered to hash what he'd seen on his side into something we can deal with. He thought it was worth ghosting through into this disasterpiece to let us know.

Someone like me, he says after, who is not me anymore.

Some angst worth it enough to make him lose all he knew about it. Despite herself, the residue of silence makes her murmur over this come out strained, like she could care less. Even as her own ghost is telling her it really couldn't.

He said, Jewel says, each word tendrillike in translation, cluster patterned vibes into the Loum, trembling a cool



breath through her. That something was bleeding through that took people apart. To study them and then put them back together. The way it found them.

Clouds of strung spores, the tethering a white silk mesh— weave plastered and flickering away, replumed with each new waver of his meaning. Plastered and vanished, disintegrating in sobs like candle wax burning through.

He said they weren't on anymore. When that happened. After that you're off, you're gone. But for what this was that was okay, it couldn't think its way past that.

Bleeding through what, she says. You're being weird. The Interwave?

This thing could aug off the Interwave, Jewel says. You know? It knew how, it had the shape in itself, it understood. It comes from somewhere the Interwave hasn't factored in yet. Will never factor in, I think. There are limits to that stuff.

Those pills, she says, and she thinks she's just thought it to herself. But Jewel blanches, bone albino for the time she needs to realize the silence residue has worn off.



They were, he says, pre-measures. The Velih didn't like the sound of any of that, and they knew it, before I knew it.

You built this, she says. You built it, right, so it had been built, for a while. But in its youth it stayed beneath the surface. It was just the bones of all things, for a while.

Crawl before you walk, he says. But what was a tic out there, in here, is a stutter. His words are jagged spikes in entrance but soft, stray motes and orbits in the fade out, in petals unraveling and keeping a tattered tangle, the swirl of cuts keeping only cloud papered over the weaving.

And now it's really hitting its age, isn't it? That's what the corrosion is.

This one, he says, ekes it out even how it starts, and she rolls her irony around in her. Dreaming of, in some way, her shell, and her eyes contained in it shells also. Inked dots caged behind the plaster of sclera. The thinnest skin, and yet she knows from here. Her eyes on the beater, it would always be like glass that way. It wouldn't move.

Ink dots, though, she thinks, moving.



It's a ghoster, he says, won't be me. Could be anything.

You can at least tell me, she says, what I'm gonna have to live through.

One figures, he says, this stuff, in that deeper decay, trending out from there.

The pulse, she says, fine. It's in here with you. Give me some way to know that, then. It's helpful. It makes it less annoying.

You'll, he says, notice.

Chill, he says, and so annoyed at that choice she's swept herself away. Back staring at the squared glow, the glaze of herself trapped within its own glaze of wavering light, all the RNG glyphs painted into it, in their entropy to keep her hazed out.



HYPERDEPPED

Because it's all, she thinks, childhood removed like a tumour, like it's the growing that messes you up and this you should wear like a scar in case everyone forgets. The new boys seem weak but their stares eat you from the inside-out like void radiation. From the charred fusions of their eyebrows to the black pits beneath.

One in ten or so now, still a symptom of the problem she's only understood by getting used to it. A season through and she's got it clear.

But of course when she sees them she's not seeing them.

She's seeing Jewel's smirk of triumph, his slanting mouth about to notch her in his social conflict belt. The sliver of void there, peeking out.

Out here because her beatertop oh-so-happened to blow a fuse after she'd logged off. Found out this morning, shaking off hair plastered to her brow from a dream she can't remember. But, she thinks, if she lost calories over it writhing it means his stupid mental got to her.





Once she'd realized she had to go outside, that was it, it was over. She didn't need any excuse for it to put her in a bad mood. And nothing about it made it seem more like an excuse than a reason.

And so she's telling the dude lurking barter in Tachae's she just needs a stupid energy pod and why didn't he get that the first time? And his lips crook into crescent moons before he smoothes his face out and tells her that was the first thing she's said since she got here.

So she has to turn the breeze on, knowing on some level it could be hyper attention-dep chess on a stranger, but the Velih can edit the tapestral context however they feel like. It's not about giving them a reason, it's about not making them want to do it.

"Sorry," she says, "it's just that I can't afford the frills, you know?" Frills here being, she thinks, a rig like I just came here out of a dream and wanted to see the electric angels, can you show me.

And the way the walls here are threaded into the ghetto conceptual is a little too much. The blase paper the shade of dry ice is peeling like half-skinned meat. The floor makes her want to use it to traverse back out of here. The



only thing gleaming is the hardware, and she can tell that's because they've cranked the glow up to reckless levels to wash out both pixel death and fizz stains smearing the chasses that she hopes were once carbonated matter.

This dude's eyes are fine. But she still can't really see all of them because of the way a woollen cap is slouched over them, thinning them to half circles like all she needs to see is their lower workings to know what's up with him. The hair stringing its way into hopeful curls from below the cap is wet.

He shrugs and moves to a cabinet shoved into the corner of the room which in her view doesn't have much long-term prospects for bearing the stuff stacked on top of it. Its shade of green would be garish if it hadn't faded to the sickly colour of grass about to die of thirst. As a result of its sag what looks like a simple vidplayer is slumped against the tatters, and she thinks he's trying to figure if any attempt to open the cabinet would be worth it.

She doesn't blame him, because moving the vidplayer would involve also moving a mess of cable cords that have entwined it to other peripherals, smaller than the player and for that reason, she thinks, worth more, though she doesn't know how she knows.





But she sidles closer just to scan how he'll react, if she doesn't keep that to herself, if she keeps her body facing them. Because she can always cancel out, and playing the tape up until that point will show her getting closer to him, not any hardware. And to see if it'll throw him off, because she knows that's the worst, trying to get through it and someone is scoping you.

But she thinks he started this by putting her here in the first place, and if he didn't Jewel did by frying her beater. The dude looks like he's made a choice, shoulders squaring with some release of doubt, before he has to slouch them again to toss his stare over them.

She fights the urge to fix her fists to her hips, doesn't fight the urge to send her eyes in musing to the cabinet he's set himself before. But he got it right. Her sneakers could be frozen to the splotch they've chosen to make their home.

He shrugs, makes a ritual motion from a sect she's never run into, braces himself and pulls the top drawer open. It makes it an inch and the tremor through his body shakes him enough to swear about it. But he's released it with timing that she thinks was a hybrid of reflex and luck. He's stumbling back. From within the top drawer she sees more glow, and tastes honey as she does, as it bleeds to raise the



gradient of the room to a cramped twilight.

He catches himself against the far wall and glares at her, cat eyes, she thinks, blank beneath the burn of the glare itself. She snaps herself out of her stance just to find herself drawn closer to the light, even as she tells herself she doesn't need the room brighter right now. Already it's like seeing hell through heaven, even worse knowing you made it and they didn't, thinking that down there they don't have to think that.

But that time there was nothing in his eyes to turn her away.

Doesn't matter that there's something in his voice, a distant question: what is she doing? ... stuck-up tighter than ... someone else. He swears. And she thinks, all the strength I've hidden is leaking through my limbs.

Everything in that shine is safe before it seeps out my pores.

And she's yanked it open and kept the serene stillness of the tableau. Did she even touch it? She's not sure, but even as the light's sudden burn is forcing her past her own shoulder, she's seeing his slumped body against the plaster. Every seam of flesh swallowed in vacancy of its ghost, as





if in mourning for itself, head hung low, his woollen cap waxing into sight a new absence, a thatch of hair spilling from a tear in it that she hadn't noticed.

She screams at his shell. I still have to be here. Why aren't you still around to get that?

He asks, rubbing the jaw that follows his eyes up at her, what that means. He's getting up. But the light, she'd seen in his eyes, had been gone. Seen that in how gloss the reverb of the afterlight was, too lacquered, sleek as the finish once owned by the machines.

To, she thinks, in herself helpless, even take the care here needed, localized even to here.

But that decay was in the afterlight too, smeared in trails of dust and the blotched etchings of fabbed dew, bright candy hues when their pales were set out by it.

Still it's back now, and it's the same energy that flows out in a raise of his arm. She knows he's about to gesture behind her to what she knows is an apocalypse, a bunch of now-dead and shattered hardware.

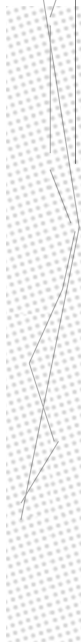
The weight of the silence after he does twins with his



shadow, cast against the flaxen paint peels, belongs to it.

His shadow blurred by the buzzing screenglow. His arms are limp by his sides, shoulderblades in splintered relief, etched in with the silence.

It's heavy, pressured into shape. Like it'll stay there long after he's moved away from it.





SEVERITY

But she thinks if Jewel's password didn't show up when she broke down over a pod that it must be waiting for her on the way home. And every time she sees a stray out here she thinks they're about to sidle up and let it slip. The strays here have old dog eyes, round and hopeful despite the beaten faces they're set into.

And she hadn't hung around for a second on the chance Jewel was in all the way to the cut of her threadbleed. It would be like him to map out events that way, and if he'd put his virus in her life, in the bones of it after getting past her psychic skin, she's too tired to deal with it. She's too sick of it and she thinks this sickness came with the virus, showing that he's got all the clues in her life but one. The one that solves the mystery they only have in common because he put that mystery there in the first place.

Telling herself that if that's how he wants to get the pathogen in there, she can keep herself safe by keeping warheads away for the minutes of time it takes to cash out a pod.

And she's seeing that coldness all around her anyway, in the starkness of any structure here trying to release itself



from the concrete that keeps it as low as her mood. Their walls are gray and the eyes judging her from the pristine bodies painted over them are blue. Wolves, she thinks. What else is there if they come at you like a pack, like they do it not for themselves but the weakest among them.

The eyes bristle the way ice clings to fur, and she thinks of how those cat eyes had warped in the light, cut up by his lids as he'd blinked his way into getting used to the new glow that to her felt sterile from the shock of how she'd first met it. But that's how it works, it hits you hardest when you're the first to see it in a while. You get anything the pod's got from being pent up for so long. He'd wrapped it with gauze to stop it shining through her unislung pack.

Flash any glowdeath like that around here and you're gonna have problems. Cluster dregs can tell, she knows, by now.

And in the severity, the compressed sprawl, she thinks if the Velih want to tip their hand that far it shows her the mood they're in, every time she suffers through it.

So by the time she hears the password she doesn't even think Jewel is any kind of psychic hacker for figuring it out. It's like reading a book when everyone around you is





dyslexic. It's just another stray mired in deadmil fashion.

It's the grief count, she thinks, it's to the death with him.

It comes in low as a song they're blaring from their clip player. She wants to tell the loser that his headphones are nowhere near any juice. That the compressed signals are just flying into space they only have access to because of that kind of pointless aural amplifying is so archaic that the Velih gave it cathedra freeware immaculacy. If the Velih give that kind of blessing to something you hate it's not going away. But they give those things out like cross-dimensional bred bunnies you can score from the black market.

No one can afford the responsibility that comes with that but the karmic resonance that breezes out from saving them from pirate-broadcast chem-amped fight club keeps everyone knowing you're on your toes there for a while. How else do you counter the satania of the promoters? They make sure to let everyone know they harvested only the best lifeforce from other quantum bunnies to give this one the fullest potential life to lose in the interwarren wars they themselves have bur-rowed into their foraged moltings.



She thinks the tech they got to autoforce shades of guilt onto the viewers' mote auras they got from Jewel's placid approach to safety. To the idea you should string some kind of ice into any thread. Did the Velih feed him that that tech? Who cares about how realistic they can sim rabbit holes, anyway? They're pumping so many social-illusive hormones in there that half the time the two warrens forget they're even supposed to agree with their own warriors.

Not that she would know.

But this tangent breaks off in her head as she sees the headphones are strung into the clip, which beams that truth in ob-sidian plastic from its perch on his velcro belt.

She's hearing a song meant for him and she realizes she can spell out every word from how clear the lyrics sound to her above their hard-strung notes. Chill the fuck out. She tells herself if shes neuralmoding here it's a fair RNG shot that those lyrics could come with anything now on-pop.

void to break through. Through the molting that has long been taut over it, that right now is black as any starless sky she's ever seen.





HIGHER GROUND

So she has that grievance imprinted in that ghost way, so his prints aren't near it. Ripples in the Interwave, she thinks, like asking it to prove you ever entered it.

Only the world you left keeps the tag that proves you were there.

As she comes in she's thinking, hate patterns, hate patterns.

By the time she'd fit the pod in and sealed it with the gauze it came with, she'd hated them. On the beater's hardboard were patterns she knew that didn't show her anything real. She'd had to adjust to it, get used to a stasis that had become a veil over the way she saw them. Adjust to a meaning that had spiked itself so far home that it went right through her, even as she was looking at it.

She'd decided as the gauze unpeeled in a soft wave that this meant she'd blessed her healing, not cursed it, with used skin.

It had hurt in the same old way as she'd logged in and by the time she's spooled her whole ghost into the Loum it



was like her veins were too young to belong to her from the same old ways her blood was threading through, the same psyche mosaic filter you get with any molting.

She thinks that the age will come just waiting for the void to break through. Through the molting that has long been taut over it, that right now is black as any starless sky she's ever seen.

Then he'll have done it, she thinks, his custom molting that will show us all the true colour of our hearts.

What he'll have done in such a perfect echo is create a drowning pool for everyone seeing themselves unfiltered. The thread here is a blur where Jewel's lines shift over them. Over them, over her, her own sky being corroded. She thinks of the shell of herself, hunched over the beater, telling that self to get away, to get far, get outside.

Her shell would say, outside with the attention dep chess, the schizo trips that bleed from the walls. But now with the sky gone she is far away. She can't even hear what that self has to say, what it would do if something went wrong.

When she sees him, the faint sheen of his mote aura against the dusken threadings is all that sketches him out





of them.

Dude, she says, it's over. This is death. Switch it off and start again.

I know, he says. But something tinges his aura in sepia, and she reads the flare of facade, slipping through the way he'd let it slip through.

But you can't, she says. Too deep, and you got me here too. Tell me how it works. My ghost is so far inside, thanks to you.

It's your ghost, he says, that chooses, not you. You might think you've chosen. Your body might leave. Close the heater. But if your ghost wants it can stay inside. It wouldn't be me, then. It'd be whatever's in you.

How would I check, she says, when I'm out? A glaze, the dead skin of her eyes that everyone would see but her.

Char your eyes. The reason the Tri-Sun is here is to drink it in. You'd be alone in yourself, that way. You could see if there's anything there.

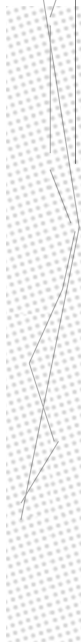
She thinks about it, her mote aura bristling with shards sinking into and rising from the gowned dust. Stabbing a



pale moon hue to offset the darkness.

That might be helpful to you, she says, getting to the end of it. It's what the Loum wants but it's stained by you.

You gotta check. He shrugs this out, easy burn on her uptake. Glitter streaks up like it's from higher ground, same translucence in their film the way the Tri-Sun had flickered out.





ALWAYS ON

Dead pixel eyes. Dead pixels holding her eyes, she'd seen in her face her own contours, shutting her spirit out. Bones walling the light inside, no fire past the film but the shine of eyes reflected back, auric trace of the inner flame. A bleed between the light inside and the ocean of screenglow around her. The screenglow off the beater had hit her and she'd shut it.

The same way these papered walls are black filmed in Tachae's gloom, keep the light spilling through the boards for them-selves.

Cat Eyes was somewhere near, asleep. After she'd logged out, those eyes were holes. Holes in their memory into the darkness that without them had the strength to swallow her. They'd scattered into the seams, had drawn her into the cracks in it.

But get in, she'd thought, slipping out. She'd thought it at the waiting world, at her last chance to see, itself slipping away.

The graffiti ebbs out from around her chalk-white as words, tendrils snaking to blotches from the doorhatch,



and plumbing into their designs, floral patterns too faded in the dusk to see except in sketches. The cluster beyond is all compressed but here every slab that makes a difference to her route is lithic. Massive, monstrous.

She hears their weight calling her, yawning in echo even through the slit of the archway.

Their heartbeat is a dirge and the silence between beats stretches under her skin, and when they thud in they're distorted by the flicker of forlorn, scattered guidelights that pulse with the Tri-Sun's stored energy.

If we can store it, she thinks, we can use it up, and that thing is heating three of them up there.

If I don't drink it, I won't know if I'm still down there.

Soon she's sitting at an ambrosaic cafe, corner window but that doesn't keep away the memdepped. You can tell a good place by if the usuals are too mindblown to process you're annoyed they're bugging you.

Right now that social loop works for her, and she's working on her chakric focal, making sure the wrong mems don't swim away. And out of the corners of her eyes she





keeps seeing Cat Eyes, and doesn't know if she'd want to see him, but also if she wouldn't want to.

Space cases she knows she has time for. Some can't tell her their name but can tell her the shape of a leaf they saw pre-adolescence. The exact last choral inplanet crossover pop was on-trend. By now she knows what not to say. What about interbleed crossover?

Too much to say, too much engraven trust to get it right. Crawl before you walk.

It's always on with that tangent.

If she asked herself, she couldn't tell them the choral, couldn't tell herself. She isn't even that stuck on these. The last time she all-night ambrosed was far back, and she wipes that mem out to get this stuff in. If she did it before that she wiped that too.

It was far back, and she thinks, on and on, she would have kept it far back.

The place is all bodies besides, always someone new to talk to but she doesn't see any charred eyes. But, she thinks, the memdepped would need eyes for their mems. Without



eyes they're drinking from a pool that isn't filling back up. And if they knew they had no ghost left, all they would have were their mems.

There's no one around to ask what it's like, if it hurts.

It's a blur of fast chats until she thinks she's sitting with someone and she checks to make sure. They don't look like they had much trouble also being in the corner, her same facing, out the pane streaked and smeared though you can't make out much. The Tri-Sunlight still a sliver eking the stained concrete out and washed into the after-burn of the guidelights which by now are cycling out with their programmed drawn release, more death than light by now. Through the smear of the window and a built-up strength of ambrosaic fog what she sees is a faint dusting of the wash, like a film of snowfall.

Still dark as the black of her ambrosaic and since she doesn't know what she's looking at she doesn't know what he's looking at. But he's peering steady, his head lined and faded out into a flop of waxed thatches, strung around his far cheekbone. Keeping his features from her sight.

Telling herself that would be the way it would want to go, but being around Jewel has her shook now, and it's easy





enough to reach up and flip it, if you had that itch.

There was too much facade, she thinks, he let too much through. Thinking it was honesty maybe, but it coils around itself forever that way, all artifice, all true spirit, all the same. All artifice, the same way.

“Is it all over now?” she says, though she can’t remember what might have begun. That’s a bad sign. They say that’s when it’s a binge, a bender, when you start tossing away thoughts you had five seconds ago.

Something I’m about to do, she thinks, will make it not matter. Because there won’t be any of this stuff around.

The sunlight, waiting for me, and I’ll know if I’m without myself, and if I’m there, all alone but not lonely, I can bleed through.

If there’s nothing left of me to bleed through I’m already dead, and it doesn’t matter.

Her brain puts that together in the breath he gives her question. “Still going,” though, is what he says, in a searching voice, one probing through the words, the angst to get through them betrayed. A careless breeze but it skips to



get over.

“Your name’s got that history,” he says, as a follow-up. “You know, that history that is still going on.”

“All names do,” she says, bugged that he’s still not looking at her. “And if you cared about my name you wouldn’t have traded it in. And I wouldn’t have traded yours in, dude, for the same reason.”

Because it must work that way, and I’m just seeing it now.

I can tell now. I have all these faces, and these names for them that aren’t there. Even when there aren’t ambrosia involved.

“I took this pill,” she says. “While ago. That’s my story. And I’m tired out. I got tired out by the way it made me feel, so long ago. How all of this is so small. I just kept getting tired.”

This must be sinking into his pool because now she can see his face, with the thatching curled over the same way but now framing an edge of earlobe.

“Everyone gets the wrist in,” he says, “at some point.” She would’ve taken more empathy but she gets it. The buzz of chatter all around has blended into a single voice, pausing





to intone discordant sounds but never for breath or for the next thought to thread its spooling out. It's one thought, patterned in different slants from inner vibes but the logic is steady, no matter the inflects on any of the details.

"Let's see yours," she says.

He thinks about it. Shudder of his shoulders like he kept some breath in that he wishes he could have released.

"To remember you by," she says, and she's thinking, sail away, unfurl those riggings, do it yourself if you have to. They used to do it like that, wristed to the prow, if it would be good luck, if you had been bad luck before.

Wouldn't say he made it all the way. Bit of ruby red gossamer peeking from where the sleeve catches, could've been the flush that traces your bloodlines when you're ambered. Maybe brighter, because she had felt stung, dug into the way a mark on someone's skin will dig, when it's past blemish, a touch more contrast. But she hadn't gotten a good look and the sleeve has fallen back.

"Dude," she says, "why does anyone even come here?"

He's looking out again. Is that the Tri-Sun making itself



known? Strands of shade, curling like ribbons, the darkness outside is swimming.

"I don't know my name," he says, "so how the fuck would I have told it to you?"

"That's not why," she says. "You would know it, if you hadn't come here. That's what got in the way."

He gives her this look, and it must be speeding up, or something is messing with the tape, like she has their eyes but just their lonely ones. Just the ones checking out what she would be doing here, what anyone else would be. It must be sped up because that light is already in here with her. It's frosting his eyebrows, each streak thickened by a glitter glow, each strand part of the dance.

Those eyes, old eyes on her and widened. Ancience in the glare of their slotted crease of iris.

"As if," he says, "I'd forget the way. All it was my whole life and it was the one thing I kept with me when I was born again."

"Like you know," she says, because this guy's going no-





where, and she knows what it means, that the light is in here with them because it's outside now for her to drink. It's setting the indoor halogen off, that split second cascade of blinding strobe before the counterkeep gets it that they should adjust. Before, she thinks, any presence at all gets it, but it stretches out and she's stumbling out but she thinks he's said something and she said something back.

In that strobe, she'd seen the memdepped live their lifetimes out, all they had left and all they were about to use up.

Yea, thought he'd said something. It had sounded like he was real fixed on being born again. All born as ghosts, he'd said, besides me. Because all of us threw it away here but I had this vibe, I wasn't sure. I thought maybe I'd thrown away some-thing that I had really wanted to hang onto.

It should've been that same sob story to her because it sounded gotcha. Trying to play on that fear that when you came here you were pretty sure you'd hung onto what was worth keeping about your first blood and its first coinciding in you and where you were. Spook story for the shallow social greet and fleet. What if dude, you actually lost what mattered most? What a trippy that would be.



In that everlasting strobe she hadn't been so sure.

So she'd been clear on what he said, but there was some vagueness in because what she'd said back is a mystery to her. But it must have fit, must have gotten her moving without feeling like she'd left it unsaid.

When she's outside, the other side of the glass, he could still be there. Thinking it over? No, trading it away. Was she hoping she'd said something he wouldn't? Some flash, some girl told me this, you know, and it made me think. So much so that I remember it but not my local area.

When she finds the Tri-Sun, her eyes are dry, and she knows they will always be now. And as it's burning in, such a soft and sweet burn this early in the morning, she's seeing what she has left to hold onto.

It distills in her, and she thinks, keeps a glimmer of hope though it's hard to focus, she sees semblance, a shape that is holding, a script, points from here to there, the shadow of her story. It's not a story she could tell herself. It's not enough that way, not enough to be sure yet. But it looks like enough to plaster in the smeared imprint her body makes in the gloop bend. The same spirit that writes the carriage of her bones. Like a shadow in a doorway.





An outline, enough to get a read.



LWCIGIZI
AEG
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
WAECEM02
NINENBV
COMMOD0
BIZN2
EBV01D0
NGLVICE2
22E
202LENDI
IB20W
0012
WGI00V
W0EN0
D0GOVE
EL
T0BOVE
W1 01
IWCIDID0
LEW00V
EIN2W0D
2ED D0
WE EGI1'
VDIBIZCI
INB
COM2ECIE
WWE1'
211
D0GOV
IB20W
T0BEM



Name: viper

Birthday: february 15

Occupation: mercenary and
information launderer

Sex: male

Blood type: ab

Likes: guns, displays of
strength, strategy games, busi-
ness outlooks, classic works
of art

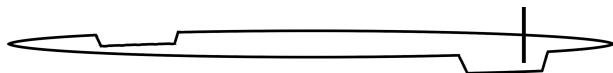
Dislikes: airsoft players, people
who try to make the wired too
like real life

Seen with: kunakida, /k fo-
rums, faux

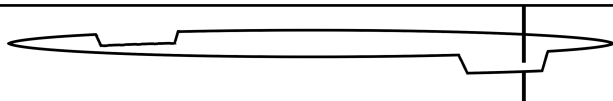
Calls himself an old head but is known more for speak-
ing with a paternal note bordering on condescension.
Such scorn attracts a particular crowd catering to mili-
tias and brokers alike

Purely transactional in his matters, dabbling in mer-
cenary work as if it's a paid vacation. His approaches
of manipulating systems reflect his nature: taking only





what is most practical out of who he encounters. His /k
work sources firearm specs to be scanned for use on the
wired acting as a middle man for the sellers. An informa-
tional working man.



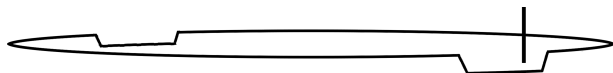
LWCIG121
LEF
TUCS2
VCCNM20M
WCECEN02
N10EBB0
E0 W0D0
B10S2
E001D0'
N1BICE2
222
N0LEWD1
1B0M
0N12
0T1000'
W0000
D000BE
E1
T000BE
W101
1W01D1D0
1E000B
E102W0D
2E0 D0
W0 E011'
0D1B12C1
1N0
C0M2EC1E
0W01'
211
D000B
1B0M
T000E0



with the wired's de-territorial properties, many primary industries rely on the affect economies: virtual personalities and experiences become prized commodities that trade across internal os'. however this has lead to an increase in psychological fatigue.

while there are official designations to aid psychological and internal-os related maladies, an emerging phenomenon has arisen from the alternative health sector. due to the roots in human biology, many alternative medicine have gained a large following through the use of soundscapes, psychological reinforcement and curated experiences to instill a sense of "well-being" which has become mostly described as something bright.

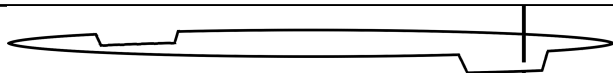
one such organization is known as revolt-era, supposedly conjuring human disgust as a form of resistance against burnout. many of these organizations use a sort of pastoral image. one that is actually not completely foreign to the wired given the many visuals of paradise like green fields as desktop backgrounds and screen-



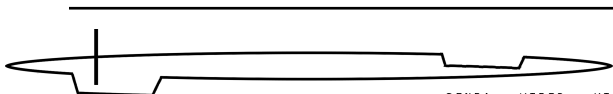
savers. the main goal is to supposedly connect with this thing that makes one human...in almost the same way the megacorps use the same content for their virtual personalities and economies

- the real world still somehow bleeds through and clots up the electric signals...

<amended note from a tai shu kwong representative>



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECENW2
G10EBBV
COMMOD0
B1202
EVBVIDW
N1BVICE2
23E
2026END
1B20W
0012
VRIDW
W0EW
D0G0E
E1
F0B0E
W101
IWCIDID0
LEW0B
E102W0D
2E1 D0
WE E11
VDIB12C
10W
COM2EC1
W0E1
211
D0G0B
1B20W
F0B0W



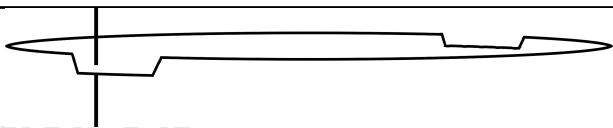
DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

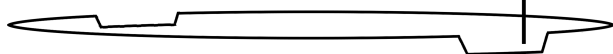
p54CH0gramm0

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

Synopsis

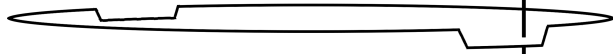
users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. f0xtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.

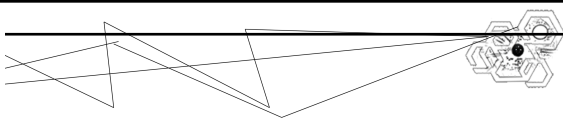




Last Time

virtual currency crisis forces the mega-corps to pivot their activities to physical trade within the real world, and foxtel enters its empty streets.





cw: gun violence, guerrilla warfare, death, execution, nudity, sexual harassment

pulling up to the housing estate high rise where i can faintly see through its opaque glass covering, i meet a welcome terminal, an old bulky appliance with a map directory graffitied over, signs of life looped around maps, damp air soaks into my jacket from the moisture emitting off a wall . whose spray-painted spaceman fades into a mix of colour resembling a human figure.

the lobby contains a couple makeshift shops occupied units with extravagant neon signs that dyed the concrete around us. entering one of them, a green light envelops me from the grey ubiquity as i feel a faint mist cooling me down.

'like it? it's called bright mist, it contains many healing energies' the shopkeeper in a suit informed me though i was

PROTOCOL 02.2: TRANSFER II



more annoyed he thought i was going to make a purchase.

‘err...no...what is this?’ i ask as i don’t see any products.

'ah, this?' these are health products and ambience. you know zen and feng shui? one must cultivate an environment to achieve their dreams'

his bringing up of dreams as a simple destination really made me think less of him, hoping viper would arrive soon as the salesperson takes capsule jars of esoteric tree roots and nuts with essential energies.

'these bring out the luminous energy of the person, it brings focus. real focus. take this.' he says before materializing a figurine out of virtual space. 'see this figurine? it's made of signals but here's another one'

he hands me another, this one the same but its surfaces
planed into its shape, not vibrating from the static that
comprises its limbs.

‘this one is real, there is a difference and one must really discern the difference. now is the time to seek out the real.’

‘to do what?’

DENPA ≠ WIRED ≠ VIOLENCE
 ρ≡ΨCHOΓρ≡mm≡
 ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

‘huh?’

‘i’m asking what all this energy is supposed to do? produce? consume? i think your ancestors are probably shaking their head at you, slimeball’

‘please, no need for vulgarity’

‘what’s vulgar is your predation.’

at this moment, viper appears from the corridor and places his hand on my shoulder in jovial cheer, wearing a balaclava and dress-shirt clasped in body armour.

‘just who i wanted to see. please forgive them, they’re uh-anti-social’

‘oh, they’ll learn their ways eventually’ the salesperson said ‘we all have our work to attend to’

viper’s room was completely empty save for some workout equipment in the middle. before thinking this was some elaborate prison with the orange walls, a compartment slides from the wall showing supplies that enshrined his devotion to preparation should a fallout occur.





‘did i tell you you look like the worst 2000’s protestor ever?
seriously, it’s like the cia sent you’

‘oh? i’m glad to be sent with someone of intelligence’

‘intelligence no, more like unaware normalfags, so what
did you want?’

‘so, you know of a group called revolt-era?’

i heard of them as they were a health services group that
preyed on alienated individuals who weren’t as adept to
using an internal-os and allowed them reprieve or gave
some guidance and products to make one feel competitive.
viper then eats a raw egg and raw meat from the fridge
compartment before they all close to retain the supposed
zen of the room.

‘so, they got these interesting diets and i feel better than
i’ve ever been. now, they wanna take on the building in
a full revolution. their landlords don’t take care of em,
and they’re not gonna stand for it. they say the automated
system isn’t assigning resources properly and no one has
bothered to intervene. a human touch if you will’

‘sounds more like a customer service problem, besides,



why are you so into it.'

'hey if it works, it works'

i only sigh. this was typical viper, extracting whatever instrument he can out his ventures whether health related or not, forming some undefined persona comprised of niche diets and habits. he watches footage of 21stcentury demonstrations out of a screen from virtual space where clouds of tear gas engulf streets, crowds flickering yet maintaining their movement with pipes and even bricks, an image of collective human effort. 'fighting and dying are one and the same. anyway, a place like this, everyone's in their own rooms which is a spatial metaphor for their own virtual spaces, consuming their own rations of content, reacting in a kind of nimbyism. now we can get into some old fashioned collective effort, no hive mind shit. faux's gonna be fuming when he heard i can wax poetic like a fuckin' greek philosopher."

'so what do you want me to do?'

'glad you asked!' viper claps his hands to cue my role, as to him, everyone seemingly needs a role that could be assigned at an instant, making life work in the same way a factory runs with its own mechanics that turned the day's





purchases. 'so, i have a bunch of users that are preparing to visit the main server of this building. so many people logging into it and spamming it at once is gonna crash the system which should give time for our shooters to move in before security teams deploy.'

'wait why is there one server. shouldn't they have dozens?'

'this building is old so who cares. it's our opening. do you get it?' he asks less out of seeing if i understood and more if i realized the opportunity at present. although the plan did sound too much like one of an age old conquest with a mob trying to be some overwhelming force like the hands of a god.

'sounds easy enough, guess we all have to be in the right place in the right time.'

'this place is proofed up so you can enter the server space without having to worry about your body getting raided irl'

viper leaves, the door slides shut at his exit. i enter the server known as the meditation room, electric signals sparkle into the space, cooling my limbs now moving with ease. but i wasn't placed in another virtual space as



the orange walls remained as if to maintain its visual link to the real world, the same image that ripples around me.

the room becomes translucent with others users sitting in cubes. sans serif text flashes in front of me.

look.

the followers are on the same path.

recenter your mind.

reluctant, i focus until the walls are planed straight concentrating only on the shapes around me, the five square faces i'm aware of that solidify as i no longer see through them.

good.

the luminous king is present.

at this, two fragments of light glow just before me as i make out the slight bulge of a muscle, another with waved edges, flesh that had been shorn off with a saw. i wondered if these were also seen by the other users participating in this server crash, filling the servers with self-affirming messages, bearing the flesh of an extraordinary cut into multiple pieces to the point one can't even recognize their





supposed sanctity or image.

these are the pieces of radiant flesh

these pieces will dispel the illusion of electronics

begin to revitalize your life.

a soundscape audio file swallows the silence with a collage of natural sounds, animals grazing and making mating calls, uttering guttural noises that somehow affect the user, an ogg file with how crisp it reverberates around me, even taking care to envelop the space the same way old-century sound systems do. throughout the sounds of crickets and cicadas, there is also a voice, a whisper which upon closer inspection started to discern into mantras. positive affirmations against the wild debris of noise crunching to resemble grass. these same words that fell dead upon the contours of my body, taut in the void against their pithy ascensions and i felt myself separate into a third space, one without dimensions but not a static plane but one that would slowly allow my propulsion, travelling in a void entirely without.

whiplash, the sounds of nature dissipate into distant gunfire and footsteps in the corridor outside. incarnated out



of the void, it takes me a moment to feel the weight of my limbs dried of their electronics, hands press against the floor, the limits of touch, the far wall, the limit of my sight, the footsteps that left the corridors silent, the limit of my hearing and i step towards the end of the world. viper sends a live feed to my os through an encrypted channel. there may have been enough electric signals to broadcast but not enough for security forces to set elaborate choke points such as setting up closed spaces or spawning greater artillery. what he sends are from cctv feeds, an ai algorithm sorts through the footage with the most action from scenes of revolt-era fighters firing upon security force blockades while another throws a molotov towards them cutting to another scene of a security guard pounced by an unarmed resident, giving in to the wild arcs of their limbs scrounging for that new world that was bequeathed to their body. each of these framed with basic cinematography principles cutting to a beat, viper on another camera shouting out a video d-j who remixes clips of his firing into entire brigades of soldiers with an aa-12 automatic shotgun drumming an incessant roar, the song of the apocalyptic revolt, beating out the calls of compliance, of nerves and cognitive activity into overdrive into these flashes of artillery and destruction.



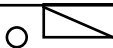


with building security soon surrounded, the livestream montage from the ai and various video dj's submitting their clips of triumph, massacring squads or shooting surrendering officers play over the wired for morale. fighters slump on walls sapped of their earlier verve while they lay their weapons while others quickly mobilize remaining forces, improvising prison brigs and medical stations in any of the vacant rooms. while a group marches almost mechanically towards their next objective, one of them stops and grabs my arm smiling.

'hey, hail to the luminous king. they have watched over us and granted us our lives back.'

he left to return with his squad falling back in line. i wasn't sure how to take it, his word nor his thought to stir me from my observation, perhaps to feel allied with their cause, because we were human and have similar desires. a similarity that means little as he gets farther away.

expelled gunpowder on an upper floor chokes the hall and viper only giggles at the carnage around him, all these ejected catridges and ignited gunpowder all realizing some movement, some change that had taken place where we would once again find ourselves from electric and smooth surfaces into the coarse earth. we head for the



control room beyond a sliding door, long bulky consoles with terminals behind polished glass, a space of the early computers that gave a logic to the operation of industrial machine, assuming their operation could now be capable of greater distribution of resources . we move in, checking the sides before crouching below the console units confirming it to without contacts.

‘clear.’

‘clear’ viper responds from the mezzanines. ‘nobody in sight. thought there would at least be operators.’

‘maybe they transferred all that to the wired’

‘nah, this is an old building. they couldn’t move everything to the wired without proper 9g infrastructure’

looking at the terminals, all the functions were set to auto, a bunch of custom programs made to preload messages to building security, direct messages from residents to their respective departments. all these graphs and algorithms toil away in a loop to direct water and coolant to the rooms on-screen which only show my reflection erring from their graphs.





light reflects off a lens on a security camera at the rear corner, white warps on its glass curvature.

‘hey viper,’ i called staring at the camera lens. ‘why do i get the feeling someone’s watching’

viper looks around, aa-12 at bay and stands listening to the faint frequency of whirring computers but it seems to produce a void that swallows his attention.

‘nobody’s here. then again, everyone’s always being watched huh?’ viper concludes, walking to the terminals that light the rocky edges of his face in blue. i run an interface and use the infograph program that maps out all the possible terminals used in the building from maintenance servers, to the food and agriculture divisions and others. at the top was the one for building management system and i set a course for that. a prompt tells me to enter through the nearest door.

‘i’m gonna look around.’

‘you do that but whatever you do, make sure you get out through a door where no one can see you. these yokels might get scared when you do your cyber magic shit’



‘can’t you just set up a connection to your room i can use?’

‘fuck, whatever...’ viper groans.

‘well don’t let me put you out.’

‘yeah...yeah, kunakida’s always telling me to be hospitable. goddamn. why can’t someone just be aloof or whatever’ and so on as viper sends me the room connection key while he walks into some dim corner of the space brimming with black boxed attractions. i was just thankful to miss him ranting about how hard it is to be moody and edgy these days, maybe saying that because no one really plays outside, nobody gets to be dirty let alone vulgar.

through the sliding door, static tickles over my clothes as i draw the vp70 and walk on concrete shrouded in darkness, an empty stage just waiting for some apparition or just someone to initiate some rote dialogue.

the echolocator scans, making a wireframe of the floor but the scan range continues into the void, my steps like drop-lets from a slowed rainfall. they did say that being in the wired physically is like being in the damp tropics, back when the virtual had a faint paradisiac air. beach desktop backgrounds or an empty field, all the virtual leisure just





in reach from those cubicles where we could become some neoclassical ideal sculpted into marble busts.

burning through the darkness is a blue ember that pares into a human figure without any of the usual colour, meaning it's an unfinished composite. the contours of their limbs unsettled with corrupted data and all it does is blink within the newfound virtual body encasing it.

the infograph interface identifies the individual as the building manager by the geometry of their faded side part and facial lines, the wired pulls up reports from some building staff on their own forums asking where the building manager is and others saying they get a couple calls from him whether something needed checking out.

'no need to search me on the wired...you already know who i am'

'well...knowing is not exactly a denouement is it?'

'such theatrics. i have no need for such a useless endeavour'

'no need? you're in an empty space in the wired and you don't seem like a meditative sort.'



eventually, the being in front of me starts shedding their corrupted polygons and rendering, their skin eases into the face of a young man who begins to curl their fingers, feeling the smoothened palm.

‘got your connection fixed?’

‘this is no ordinary connection, i have shed all attachments.’ he states, walking through the wired, raising a hand and squeezing at electric signals that are now starting to flow around him. ‘you know i was aware of the revolt. there were simply too many people in that building. they always wanted more. it was just a cesspool of desires. everyone simply had their own functions and with the corporations, they give citizens something to do but even then, living is not enough, that is all there is. so i just did the necessities. now i have no need to be there anymore’

i figure out what he did and the thought only allows me a ragged breath which i hope might be a sigh or beleaguered exhale before thrusting the vp70 at him, electric signals pinprick at the motion of my arm, pulling the trigger blasts all in the brief flash from the muzzle cutting to the building manager’s shocked expression. despite the immateriality of his body, a red spot pools on his shirt where the 9mm round embedded itself and he kneels, sweating ex-





pulling some kind of energy to a place where it cannot go.

‘fool, did you really think that transferring your consciousness in full into the wired would help absolve you of the real world? you absolutely have no idea do you?’

his expression begins to collapse into sobs, fear wracks his widened eyes trying to glimpse what overtook his body. i kick him to the ground and step on his chest, vp70 pointed at his nose, and i almost grin at such a pitiful execution.

‘now its my turn to talk. do you know what makes the wired, the wired? it’s because everything is connected. all the electrical signals are all particles that can be converted into any of the spaces, bodies and things you see now. but it is also the same out in the real world. you would not have had your position if you did not have your residents and those corporations would not exist without their market. you think just because you’ve come to the wired, you’ve escaped reality? take a look now.’ i gesture to his once solid arms now going limp. ‘where ever your body was, you’ve transferred everything into the wired which means you have no exit. no way out. you’ve only trapped yourself in another hell. that’s one to grow on. say hi to your boys for me.’



crushing the trigger, the shot of the handgun eviscerates all external noise before it echoes into the void. the building manager's face torn, the viscera from the peeled skin fades behind polygons as the wired slowly forgets his existence.

despite this semantic rambling, i feel a little restless if not bored, thinking this ended in a too banal way, a building whose resources were being unevenly distributed due to a building manager abandoning their duty, all because the world was not simply calculated functions that move like something out of a physics equation. whatever the case, killing him was little more than something to pass the time in a grand sort of way, busting bad guys and all. i check the chamber of the vp70 with still 17 rounds in it as i release the slide, punching in the next round to fire, the inner mechanics at ready.

transferring into viper's room, the encased rations and weapons are still in the same position as they were, the room dark but occasionally lit from the screensavers off his bed and computer unit, its shelf brimming with instant food and games that i hadn't heard of set in ancient wars mapped to strategy grids and sometimes little videos of dots trying to consume the other, an abstract dismissal of





combat if i ever saw one.

residents gather around the commons lobby where one of the fighters is giving a speech. the guerilla preps their decree and starts off proclaiming it a new day where the building can finally be in the hands of and i stop listening once the elevator arrives, aborting all those words behind closed silver doors.

outside, executive sedans are parked around an armoured van with mesh windows where a crineberg tactical team gears in visored helmets that display aiming reticles and bullet trajectory in which each operation is an alignment of intersection between operator, weapon and target. their lips protrude from the smoothed cheeks with bored expressions as they operate security protocol around an executive talking with one of the guerillas. on my os, i check their relation and surprisingly, the executive too is a revolt-era faithful with various posts about what stocks are profitable, where to stockpile and talking about antique luxuries such as urns. by the time i reach my car , a black sedan awaits, with men in black suits and bulky headsets, one of them opens the rear door, expecting me.

‘come with us’ the man with the slight goatee says. it’s strange to see their mouths move, their bodies with steps



and circulations still clinging to the real world beyond their headsets,

i set my own car to auto-pilot back to my place before i enter an ocean of static within the interior of the sedan, my limbs slowed rendering me unable to draw a weapon at speed, only able to move with stiff, dainty gestures. the men in black sit in front of me and once the door closes, the windows completely black out, cutting me off from the streets.

‘my apologies, the virtual space we have set up is to deter any harm that could come. think of it as just a formality.’

‘i-it’s fine...not my first cocktail party...’ i struggle with the signals, nearly choking me but loose enough for my throat to make the needed noises to communicate. the men in black are completely still, not even a rising or falling shoulder to indicate breath.

‘i will get to the point. we’re aware that you’ve been researching into the executive council’s recent retraction on their stance for virtual production. we’re doing the same. i think there is something we can do that would be mutually beneficial’





‘and that is...’

‘an executive from tai shu from castle forest has had strange correspondences with a name that interests us. the luminous king?.’

‘...’

‘it’s alright, we know you’ve met them. no one knows where they come from. only that they appear to the dysphoric and alienated. they think of the luminous king as a personal saviour.’

‘but they would not know anything about such. the being now mobilizes them to commit acts of atrocity.’ the other man pipes up.

‘can’t you get ica to look into it?’

‘their administration is not equipped to deal with these situations. in order to get a reaction out of the enemy, one must attack. you of all people should know that.’ he pauses. ‘regardless of that, we suspect that perhaps these companies have an executive that’s corresponding with each other, and they have significant backing. in fact, i’m sure even you’re aware that crineberg’s appearance was



no coincidence. the executive has a project there to focus virtual space efforts. something that is becoming a new trend after the crash. it's natural people want focus after a catastrophe'

'revolt-era is just another clique of people against the production of bandwidth and virtual space. call it the remnants of a medieval period. of course, one that is just as violent but they do not understand that their time is up'

from the palm of his hands, images of burning cellular towers, some with debris already falling back to earth then a report about certain artifacts that cannot be replicated on the wired such as currency and the subsequent debate, a stock forecast for aluminum metals reaching euphoria upon the increasing demand for physical commodities.

'you work for the legislative council?' i ask before i realize i may have crossed a line. their mouths smiled.

'do you think those old men with their sophistry and round tables could organize such a feat? it is their carelessness that has brought them to where they are. their lack of control over their respective industries and capitalists has become their undoing. we simply ensure order.' unseen forces warp the frequencies looming outside as my own pulse





quickens with the uneven amperes, 'we've already set up a line to castle forest as a maintenance worker,'

files appear on my interface: technician's apron, toolsets and wiretap programs concealed in diagnostics. unlike some companies, it seems castle forest still requires their technicians to be almost naked to reduce conductive shock and as a security measure in case the technician turns out to be a saboteur.

'great, talk about state humiliation'

'just focus on the payoff.'

the car stops and the two men seated in front of me blur, clouded surfaces pour into a fountain that sat in the center of an atrium, rock formations gather around synthetic plants, light breaks into spears from the stairways and skywalks above that weave from end to end of three hundred floors yet these fragments, illuminate the branch crest at the center of the atrium, a gold lion lavished in vines. i didn't even think megacorps even spent much on these kinds of luxuries anymore. even so, this virtual building was in crisp detail, no doubt modelling the actual interior of the real atrium, their psycho-symmetric system wouldn't be interfered with by an individual's presence.



nothing would perturb the passing of data, every second a trade of stock, an insider tip, a message to sell a new product line and supply to any of the virtual domains and said products transferred around the world, a wiry globe structure spinning around the post of the stairway railings.

i receive the order for the fix, a simple system check-up for a broker in castle forest's sustainability division which allows me to peruse their systems mostly by data-logging physical shipments. the sub menu funnels me into the broker's office as that was the only area i was granted access, i convert older operating systems, taking schematics of internal files and mechanisms of physical modems and as i think the numbers, the various machines and surfaces materialize. this kind of work was simple, as if told to hold a plate without dropping it. to test the connection, i load in the dimensions and within the office through the electric signals, a wave parts into the flat walls revealing objects from the wooden veneered desk to the synthetic fauna that also acts as a humidifier.

resetting into the real world office, a man opens the door, stopping short upon seeing me. an interruption with all the unexpectedness that careened systemic loops into an empty drone. hair trimmed and parted around a tightened





yet pale face shining under the fluorescent lighting as if scanning the image of a well-to-do businessman within his repetitive motions, the steps he takes before he smiles and places his hand on my shoulder with a firm grip, enough to leave a slight ache.

‘corrine? when did you get back? that’s quite an outfit you’re wearing. i knew you said you were going to change divisions but i didn’t know you were meaning this.’

‘i-‘

‘oh i’m sorry, i didn’t mean it like that, doing system maintenance work is fine work. it comes back to the old trades...’

‘i suppose so...’

‘yes it does, doesn’t it? anyway, let’s set up a time to have a luncheon. they have a new bakery at the atrium. this one they have this picnic server to go to.’

‘uh’

‘yes, just give me a call’ he said shaking my hand before heading out. i wasn’t able to form any impressions about him although i don’t even think he knew himself, only the



transaction of our words, dodging any lapses that might inhibit these exchanges of meetings or symbols that filled atriums or office spaces lavished in future meetings. this world enmeshed in logical relationships that connected everyone. a space i was never part of despite their invitation that shut itself away as the door closed and i'm left to my familiar polyhedric realm. activating the exit programs alters a wireframe prism from 5x5x8 to a 4x4x3 according to my room dimensions, slivers of my room recede with the coming sunset, my contours soft from the now distant lights that once glittered freely across the intersections now scarce with only a couple transport vehicles.

the wiretap program activates tracking calls from the castle forest office, deadlines for meetings regarding crineberg's takeover of the suzuru building, where a broker delegates the increasing metals prices to another office. a memo comes in about a retreat to after work at the biomes, sections of undeveloped/redeveloped acres created out of sustainability projects to turn ruins into picture-es-que landscapes with many companies hosting well-ness retreats to reconfigure one's natural rhythms

a message comes in and it's from crineberg systemcorp who have some hardware to offload at a warehouse off the





docks, one of the legacy transportation facilities maintained for low bandwidth areas and shipping authentic products. pick-up already arranged at the underground parking of a crineberg facility at kreizer boulevard. i eye the contract which says that crineberg has the right to prosecute the deliverer for the mishandling of this package. this clause only gets a resigned tribute from me as i get up to dispense the contract. upon exiting, i wasn't followed and it seemed that it might be just a short drive as i enter the super silhouette car and drive off, keeping the engine subdued out of some haphazard formality.

crineberg's building was a tall smooth edifice like any of the surrounding buildings identified thanks to the car's user interface. their parking garage was at the back which was distinguished by its lack of planter's boxes or any slight decoration that was allowed. crineberg kill-teams turn to hide behind the surrounding parking pillars as if to become part of this superstructure that controlled all actions within its bounds. a couple forepeople load the package, noted only as mining goods and agricultural tech into the front cowl of the car deceptively unguarded as i imagine any deviation to cue a shutting of all exits before a show of gunfire. upon receiving the packages and coordinates, the car pulls off to the city's featureless blocks quivering



between the passing streets where for a moment, those buildings whose smooth faces leave only a lone reflection could wipe away into opaque skies. however, one or two parked cars bud off the nearby streets, glinting across my side window like the drawing of a razor.

turning into santunum street, a lone figure stands in the middle of the road and slowly their profile reveals a frilled dress, the headlight falls on circular lenses. chihaya stands, unfazed by the incoming vehicle and i stop, seeing the glock 18 in her hand, someone's side glance from a mirror of their car parked on the side, waiting to deploy, its front seats like human silhouettes. i wasn't aware of how much each company interferes with each other's shipments, let alone if this was just another of chihaya's services but i only return the formality placing a hand on my holstered vp70.

connections didn't work, her line encrypted so i only mouth my next words

i do not work for them, i'm working a case on a virtual currency shorting

given that lip-reading was a requirement for elite units in tai shu, a fact saturna slipped me before, chihaya's rights





her head a moment as if intercepting the meaning shaped off my lips before tilting it down, eyes level onto the blade of her pistol's front sight, the hole of the barrel flashes orange, sparks dance around the car and i instinctively duck off as dents scratch and warp the windshield from the 9mm barrage. supporting units disembark to cover her, firing from cover positions behind an alley and their parked cars. from the interface, i set the car to autopilot and it thrusts forth reaching a speed that flies past concrete, exhaust blasting a volley of backfires as it swerves from the tai shu operators until the car is free from the hail of artillery hazing the air behind me.

soon, i arrive at the docks, grey farms line the concrete pier that breed cargo containers, their corrugated sides undulating in a metal sea, these objects that would flow into the electric signals of the wired through 3-dimensional scanning, imports across worlds. a foreman directs me into warehouse 7 where some crineberg guard teams trained their weapons at my car to make sure their shots would spear me at all angles should i attempt to resist. i keep my hands on the steering wheel.

‘open the compartment’ they order

after unlocking it i put my hands up as one of



the operatives approach before placing their hands on the boxes, scanning whether the merchandise had been tampered with before he nods.

‘okay! load it in’

a solar powered forklift takes the boxes, before disappearing around the corner in the obscure operations of the port. the squad file in to salute a man who walks between them in a floral printed shirt, a grizzled face that easily jowls into a drawl with a lopsided mouth. one of those men who might be the coach of a sports team demonstrating an air of the paternal as he rests his hand on my car.

‘you must be mr. zuinan?’ i’m patrick merlinghetti i’m the supervisor of your case file. welcome aboard the crineberg shipyard’ he smiled and the operatives almost on cue begin to disperse, perhaps to vantage points around me. ‘take a walk with me?’

i oblige him and step out of the car, directing its autopilot system to the nearest parking spaces within the area which would most likely be underground. watching him, the petals off the man’s shirt faded perhaps from endless days in the sun and left countours like ghosts





wandering in a silken realm, creasing perhaps from his sweating body whose tan borders on sunburn.

‘zuinan? you from old china? you don’t look chinese’

‘err...i..um...my parents were mixed race’

‘ah a halfie, don’t see too many of those. now everyone’s going half, thirds. whatever. it’s hard to keep track’ he laughed thinking of a simple world. ‘i saw your case file and it said you were under fire from tai shu?’

‘yeah, that’s right...’

‘yes, they are quite the eager bunch. i’ll give them that. i just don’t know what goes on in that company. i heard they were using the likeness of a missing girl for some game, can you believe it?’

despite this seeming familiar, it only leaves a faint sensation, a hand that brushes mine in the memory of a crowded train.

‘no, not really’

patrick then throws his arm around me, his head



close where i can smell the coffee that heated his breath.

‘alright zuinan, do you know what goes on here?’

‘uhh...shipping freight?’ physical products’

‘yeah, but do you know what really happens?’ he says circling his arms around the answer that still does not occur to me.

‘n-no?’

‘well, let me tell you. with the megacorps having their own military divisions and the age of corporate militias back during the global shift. though it was more a catastrophe’ he chuckled ‘but that unregulated conflict and fighting monopoly still exists albeit in much smaller forms. so some of these products, are real, and some of them are fake. great diversionary tactic. some are so close to the real thing’

i didn’t know what he was attempting to accomplish by revealing this information. perhaps his bequeathing such intel was to establish some trust between us but what he said only brought annoyance.

‘so you’re telling me that that transportation job i





just did was for nothing?’

‘now, i wouldn’t say it’s for nothing. we need as many people as we can to support this livelihood of ours. besides, we just get our pay and go. it’s what we gotta do,’ he shrugs out of acceptance of this world of callous instrument, bodies that barely could right themselves from the machines and signals that throw them across real and virtual worlds that only exists for their own sake.

‘anyway, that was good work out there, we’ll contact you if another job comes up’ he extends his hand and i shake it, assuming these formal motions which fell apart once the contractor left, the pier now deserted as the concrete sparkles from the sunlight waning into the mid afternoon, despite the slight presence of electric signals that change the sight before me, rippling at the very thought, it dissipates, levelling against the stone limit of the earth.

in the docks parking garage, the concrete pier sunk to an underground of grey pillars surrounded by other vehicles wrapped in grey tarp as if the ghosts of traffic that might have filled tunnels after hours. i drive off remerging into the empty city, sunlight flickers between buildings and the leaning chrome pillars at the side windows. i open the interface window to check the wiretap



to find the broker has gone out of office to a retreat and without many clues, i decided to follow with only the event being listed as 'manor on southeast biome, welcoming archway'

i open a photography forum for the outer lands, acres of greenspace saved and replenished by sustainability projects who have frequently invited photographers and 3d modelers to capture the vistas for servers.

the forums show various landscapes from the outer regions framed beside blocks of text describing the scene in minimal language and dimensions, mountain scene 11x8.2, cottage in plain, 50x1. eventually as i scrolled through the pictures i find one of a mansion peeking from behind a plateau, rotating my palm to localize it brings up a map and its ownership under a company known as the helios group for private requisition. a fancy word for unused until further notice. possibly a remainder from the leisure age when megacorps tried building colonial mansions in the outskirts to target a historicist market.

the cityscape soon fell as i drove to the biomes where fauna submerged smooth plazas into brambles of leaves, a feudal silhouette of a distant forest frilled the horizon glowing from sunset blushes a fever of colours.





approaching the mansion's perimeter, i wait until night as the sun becomes a faint ember. stepping out, reality cleaves itself out of the shadowy dome of the car's interior, propped by its leaning pillars where two lines converged into the verticies of the world, a faint panorama ahead that now escapes their glass bounds as gravel crumbles under my boots into incongruous shapes amidst the total ebony atmosphere looming overhead with moonlight, my jacket braces against me, fluttering in the throes of wind that swayed the fir trees with frenetic rushes of green against the evening canvas.

i begin to approach, setting my internal temperature against the cold as my steps tread on soft ground that might seem comforting in the everchanging scene before me with knotted branches and shiftless green, a veil of snow seemingly enchants this pasture of some primordial mystery in the unbroken sky, just beyond the serrated edges of the earth, the night whose stars no longer become disparate coordinates but now melding into a soft tide lathers from the lights of unseen cities and virtual spaces against the atmosphere, what gatherings breathed this evening full of life that tethered between my steps and this vista, even above, a layer of clouds surges a familiar plane, one that i've seen in my dreams whose grains would



break upon my limbs like static, but that desert scene was inverted from its axis, rather, i was looking at it from a realm entirely apart and yet, it didn't dissipate upon my waking hours, nor the blue light skies within virtual spaces whose floes of information and records of the movements of physical objects fantasized this absolute apex of vectors and statistics leading to this scene that some might call the sublime.

my steps sink into snow that formed little moonlit continents over the remnants of fields, its planed surface conceals unseen leaves before i reach a small cliff before the shore ending with crystallized surface which was a lake, frozen, just at the entrance of the mansion grounds my nerves seize yet clamour to step forth, and i break into a run, the ice groans from the stride of my legs without electric signals enhancing their movement, fatigue still far as the momentum carries me across towards the knoll of grass ahead.

gunshots dispatch the indigo air with a rapid flash of light where the only sounds were the spears of ice fragments scattered in front of me, my steps no longer supported by anything as i plunge underwater, my descent slows into blue lavished by a harvest of soft globules before they clear





the waves from the water's surface that play with golden rays of moonlight dissolving into fragments, bending filaments within a bulb,, spurred from my moving limbs i swim up to the surface, rivulets run down my face as the internal os activates its emergency heating systems. the ice sheet from where i fell, a translucent ceiling where blurred figures tread, fanning out as their steps create blurry impressions as if wraiths appearing from a screen of fog, heat signatures in black.

an operator fires down into the lake, using electric signals to form a virtual surface they staggered their positions on, enclosing me in their combat simulation where their os trace firing trajectories and effective ranges, lines enlaced with bubbles, particles of worlds born through the velocity of bullets and falling ice debris that penetrate the water's surface where i was afloat yet not falling, my limbs slowed but not immobile as the furies above slow into gentle, even playful lavishes of effervescent balloons that i wade past, drawing the g3 from my rear harness, the internal os tries to rectify my vision making out only the g3's iron sight, 7.62mm rounds to cross into the clear night skies.

recoil shunts into my shoulder as if planting a polymer seed of all the force that my contours, no, my



body knew apart from electric abstracts, of all the lingering thoughts over the wired's unreality realized in these sudden agitations as i weave myself around the chains of bubbles wrapping around the trails left from automatic gunfire, a fallen operator's descent in blue, pieces of the sky and its crisp minty air reach me as i surface before diving back in. swimming around, i catch two operators nearby on their interfaces and i'm bathed in the signals radiating off them and i begin to transfer onto the wired. somehow, the operator fires close, the water plumes over my vision, before the transfer begins and i'm floating, my limbs gain a smoother degree of motion as the sinuous waves underwater smooth into tall blued surfaces that surround me in a polygonal formation, my reflection fixed to my wandering eyes, battle rifle at bay.

the mirror's verticies slit my reflection before it finds its familiar shape upon each pane where i realize all the edges. converge into a single point above, a glass gem.

'have you enjoyed your trip to the outside world' a voice rebounds from each reflective pane, bezelled glass threw





spokes of an unseen light across them, its presence all the more unsettling in the dimensions of the space like a melting gold halo, a heaven about to rain its fury upon the wicked.

‘who are you’

‘to be exact, we’re not exactly a group in the traditional sense’

‘we are merely supporters of a single idea’

‘we are the ones emblematic of hard work, of the perfect beings that may not be outwardly luminous...’

‘but the angular rugged frontiers of this violent abstract era.’

‘the real world has very specific tensions that drive a human being forward. things such as labour or craft’

‘it is nature, that drives us forward. it informs all processes from financial to creative...’

‘and the resulting scarcity of dreams that drives them.’

‘this is how great men are established’



‘but thanks to the wired, scarcity is now a non-factor as anyone can enable their fantasy at just the very thought, realizing their potential’

‘but many inhabitants are unaware of their body, leaving the most important vessel untreated’

‘but what if there was a way for the real world to be just as full of opportunity as the wired’

‘it all starts with the movement of health’

‘so you’re revolt-era?’

‘not exactly’

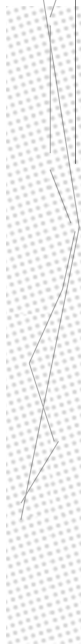
‘we are realizing the intentions of the luminous king. our chapter is known as platinum torus helio’

‘the luminous king is the body that can grant all desires with its circulating energies and can even manipulate the wired if possible’

‘but the entire world has gone too far’

‘it needs to be redirected’

‘like how the palaces have stayed as places of value, so do





we, control such'

man has been lead astray' an image of faux, the crystal structure that obscures their face unmoving.

'toiling in their own fantasy' an image of kunakida, her expression flat.

'so you're just trying to sell up the luminous king huh? sounds more like you're some overzealous brokers'

'brokers, and business are the life blood of society, without it, we would have perished in the primordial long ago'

'thanks to this, there is one way to finally tame the infinite spectacle of the wired'

'the one thing that remained is a financial system of value, prizing its increase and taking advantage of decreases'

'now that real items have gone scarce, many of their collectors realize the absence of their detail in the world'

'thus, we can restore the lavish nature of living, one the luminous king has bestowed with their infinite potential'

my reflection behind me becomes barren of all features.



only a silhouette remains rings encircling into a target
converging to my center of mass, center at 1000.

‘it’s no coincidence that a person shines from the sun hitting their sweaty brow’

‘a treasure loses its value when it is no longer rare’

‘a person who can appreciate this value will be able to find their lot and happiness.’

‘it’s only natural that the electric signals that virtual labour is just that. virtual’

‘it was inevitable’

‘it was only so long that unreality was to crumble.
a person must be able to ensure their survival after the fact.’

‘our positions allow us to produce things, amenities that make modernity function’

‘go fuck yourself... i wince, all of their platitudes did nothing even if they enveloped all sound with their booming





voices that were the banal ramblings of violent debauchery that wrecked upon the earth that people would call humanity. no, rather it was of the time where the wired bled with waves of green hills, family dinners and sprawling suburbs not unlike off a 20th century storybook framed in grey boxes of display monitors whose light spilled upon users during the finite hours of night, their faces gaunt in stifling rooms, bare of the cool glimmer from cities at the window as these homely scenes off their computer preyed upon them, already wanting everything to fall in to the houses of childhood homes and simple tales that purged the world of all necessary contradiction where each day succeeded the next in picturesque everyday where inhabitants rung through each rotation of the sun but never moved, toiling under the tragedy of their clocks as their motions were little more than transits that networked the world in a mesh of intersections and exchanges, forming a sphere that seemed like that plane always stretched beyond us.

i draw the vp70, grasping a black swan's neck, my arm an ashen river twists into a destructive light, spent gunpowder sparkles over the carnage, the slide rips backward along its track spewing casings from the ejection port, the 9mm shells ring as if small bells, chimes to a deity that



brought calamity unknown to the blue glass panes' ministrations of light in mere beams and spokes as each muzzle flash gives little time for rays to form at the crevices that fracture the mirrors, yet another silhouette appear on each sliver of glass surrounding me from each new rift on the once smooth surface, set to burst fire orange flight flickers in the hail of 9mm rounds rending the jeweled room into shimmers of glass falling around me yet the shadowy figures from the fragments melted into a total void.

'you're simply a vessel of destruction'

'we have been watching you, spending yourself on deathly games'

'we think your life should be better treasured...'

suddenly, the signals stun out of the air, falling dead across my arms as if melted ice as my weight collapses, my fingers limited by the reach of my arms as i can only stare at myself appearing out of the void mimicking my pain as if a tragic actor who keels over tightening their fingers in a wince to haggard their expressions. the point it can't reach filled by my own pain, suspended in glass fragments like the remnants of a familiar sensation that now flattens into stone coarse against my knees.





EWCIIGIZI
AET
TUCN2
WCCNM2WM
WAECEW02
NINENBV
COMMOD0
WIZN2
EBWVIDW'
NGLWICE2
22E
2N2LEWDI
IB2NM
0N12
WGI0N9'
W0EN0
D0G0VE
EI
T0B0VE
W1 N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWFOR
EIN2WOD
2ED DO
WE EGI1'
WDIBIZCI
INB
COM2ECIE
WWEI'
2II
D0G0V
IB2NM
T0BEM



It's a good thing the DARK LORD is a shut in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

Name: Llau de Xiau

(aʊ də zjo / ʃaʊ də zjo)

Birthday: July 18

Occupation: NEET

Sex: male

Blood type: B negative

Likes: Gentle Highland Ranger Patrol Lucielle, spectating on internet arguments, parasocial intimacy, ruining other people's childhoods, reliving his, growing up by layering meaning, undetectable cough syrup abuse, doujin music, long walks in the suburbs, snow

Dislikes: narrow sentimental forms of nostalgia, commercialized otaku influencers, NTR, action series, forced animation

Seen with: parents



FEED

Whimsical Ero Pedlar

@Suburbophile

I love fucking mons, uhhh I mean, I fucking love mons! stack enough layers of irony and you will uncover the secrets of the universe

891 following 45 followers



@moephrenology

Happy 21st unban! (Yes I've been keeping count)

@moephrenology idk I think you can be transmasc and a maid and I'd have the pics to prove it if Sketch Party fucking autosaved (do you wanna play Sketch Party sometime?)

@moephrenology onii-dude you were in the range of that blackout were you alright?

@lolarbitrary omg I'm so jealous I wanna eat seafood sweets like Selchia some day TT.... maybe next trip

@railroadspikehead come on man idgi still but I'm sorry

@railroadspikehead sorry

@railroadspikehead yeah I know you're in a Theology program and I'm not. but the censors cleared this and they have like super Theology degrees so maybe we can both defer to them at least putting it in the space for public discussion? idk why you're being so pissy about this

feed profile



@railroadspikehead no I think when you anthropomorphize a spiritual concept you add another layer of meaning to it, even if it's silly or stupid - in the same way irony is a layer of meaning. I know another poster who can explain this better but he told me to stop tagging him in arguments

@moephrenology trad Silmenonian priest to wife
Happy birthday Syucha, the cutest eldritch sex demon hidden in plain sight in a kids' show! reuploading the legendary conspiracy infographic

@Suburbophile liked a video on Panopticon: Lylyria - Umbilical Rose [Decensored Transformation MAD]

@Suburbophile tagged @moephrenology in a quiz on Quizzoo - How Would You Die In Anime?

@Suburbophile tagged @moephrenology in a quiz on Quizzoo - Which Decade of Memes Are You?

@Suburbophile tagged @lolarbitrary in a quiz on Quizzoo - Which Decade of Memes Are You?

@Suburbophile completed a quiz on Quizzoo - Which



Decade of Memes Are You?

I really appreciate @lolarbitrary's posting bc he can take "blah blah I don't know what to post" and make it hilarious somehow. of course I also appreciate people who just don't post until they have something to say like @moephrenology or @railroadspikehead
blah blah I don't know what to post. hiiii [waving puppy gif]

rare live action promotional music video from Super Wolf Pups: God Will Fail Even You Beautiful Creatures. found on my childhood hard drive my dad was about to throw out | wow this is blowing up but who am I kidding no one's gonna follow me from it
@moephrenology does the Train Troopers Armoured Kiss reboot look so bad it's good or so-normie-good-it's-bad. need your input on this

it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

Synopsis

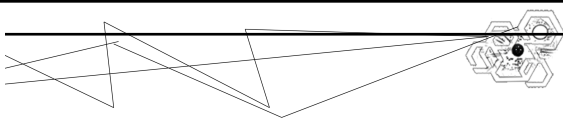
luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



Last Time

searching on the feed, luskonneg encounters a user known as the seer in the half-light indulging in fantasies that further stain his bedsheets; braz discovers an approaching danger in the underground districts





CW: alcohol, sexual intercourse (very explicit), religion, religious gender roles, blasphemy (Catholic sacrament), dubious consent, child sexualization, pornography, slurs (homophobic), stimulant abuse/addiction, doxing, controlling parents, humiliation

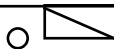
Braz glanced at the window, thick and glazed and bumpy between its criss-crossing cast iron, but familiar enough that she could make out the world on the other side as a collage of light. Normally. It was raining too hard for her to leave now, even if she wanted to. In fact if it kept raining at this rate she might stay the night. She hadn't stayed the night here since she had become Commissioner, though she still visited. This inn, Contour, was the kind of place her subordinates were supposed to frequent in her stead now. She wondered if any of them had as strangely fond associations with it as she did. She raised the hookah from the soapstone table (engraved lightly with coiling dragons) to her lips and coated the inside of the window



with a sigh.

Nobody but the innkeeper, Uñuez, would recognize her. The Commissioner was not a public figure. Even in parades she, like other high-ranking soldiers and clergy, wore a diaphanous veil. But there was nobody Uñuez would recognize like her. That was, in theory, why she was there, and not one of her subordinates. No one could replace their years of rapport; years that had begun when Braz was a military academy student in her twenties, before she was even doing the kinds of missions that brought her here. Despite this reasoning - which sounded better and better the longer she sat there unable to leave - until the rain had made her decision for her, she had been sitting there, counting down to the next deadline (15 minutes, half an hour), at which she'd decide whether to stay or whether she'd decided.

She wondered if she could explain that fondness if she were to ask anyone. There was no more perfect example of Eastern C'harn architecture, its mix of brutality and lushness, in Crach-Houarnez than Contour. She had to remind herself to call it Elthazan, even on official business; she was happy to, she harboured no reactionary schemes, but her family had raised her with C'harn; her



family had belonged to C'harn, more, they always insisted, than the other way around. The Pious Alliance of Humanity's unified naming scheme wasn't a real language, they didn't sound like real words, they sounded like something from a fantasy novel. Too clean, millennia of linguistic speciation scrubbed away. At least "Winter City" captured something of the spirit of Ysvenn, although it was so blatantly pandering to the tourist industry. The tables were slabs with rough-hewn edges jutting out from the masonry of the walls into piles of plush cushions and intricately woven carpets, translucent silk layered over rough northern fibre, deep beet reds and rotting carrot orange and strands of that locally produced shining green thread, patterns overlapping, draped up one side and down the other of the seats which were themselves no more than rectangular stone blocks. Torches on the walls and candles in glass tortoiseshells on the tables, manually magically warded to not send the whole firetrap up in smoke by the maids, nodding their heads to the side and jerking their hands in the preserving gesture that had been regional tradition since the castles of the Warring Era. And the wards against unauthorized magic on this place exceeded most military installations. (Except the ones Braz had personally instructed to fork a spell procedure from mage-for-hire extraordinaire and Contour regular Ithaz Arzhur,





at least.)

But that was the least of what it meant to her. Someone who was unromantic in all things, and especially about evil, had found one place in the world that lived up to the romance, the guiltiest hopes a twelve year old might have about this kind of work. The people who frequented Contour weren't exactly on the right side of the Crown, but they weren't racists, weren't rapists, wouldn't come up to you popping on quartz and try to tell you the same jerkoff story about their all expenses paid vacation by their secret employer three times in one night. And they were actual experts in their subjects. They knew about things the Academy didn't, about magic or fighting or parapolitical history, that they had just figured out themselves, sitting in an arrowslit apartment in the dark collecting a fraudulent disability check. Nobody here was a Dark magic user, but everybody knew one, because there was always something the Darks were doing nobody else was up on and for whatever motive whose weight was both borne like a lady's favour and sacredly private, they had to be in on it.

More or less, it made her work fun, so she'd always clung to it. And she increasingly worried that no-



one else would even think to ask about this “Seer-In-The-Half-Light” here, even if that person might be more ideally unbiased about it.

She glanced across the neighbouring tables, empty until three tables down, and one person at the bar. It was the third day of the week. Easier to get a private audience with Uñuez without attracting attention. But had she felt this lonely last time she was here? Something indeed had shifted about her ability to inhabit a space like this. And there was her maid coming, and she was going to order the big mountain-spiced buffalo steak she had to pay for to get Uñuez to talk to her. And until then if she couldn't see things the same even here, she was just going to fade the light with a subtle squint and hookah vapour until she could.

After she finished the steak, Uñuez was still at the bar, talking to the same person. Contour was a traditional gender-segregated erotic bar, a holdover from caravan stops loopholing infidelity laws for nomadic merchants, and at a seaport like this a convenient way to avoid mixing men and women from countries with different gender roles. So the person was probably a woman, but it wasn't obvious from their build or their bearing. There were peo-





ple who were understood as having the right to go in and out of both halves of the bar - anyone could if they were willing to put in the performance of their half and be read by the rules of that performance, and if their performance was distinctive all the better.

It wasn't obvious from their robes either - those were priestess' robes, but made of latex, and priestess' robe drag was more arch than one usually saw in here. The black silhouette broadened sharply, elegantly, at both the hips and the shoulders (it might have been partly the way they were sitting, bent backwards, shoulders turned towards the bar, raven-black hair pulled up behind their head in a wide jade clip, one forearm flat on the bar supporting them as their legs trailed languidly to the floor vanishing within the robe's fishtail of pink ruffled underskirts). As Braz stared their head swivelled so smoothly and suddenly it reminded them of an animatronic, like it was supposed to be a jumpscare in some sort of haunted house. They locked eyes for almost three seconds - they counted in lost breath - the eyes were grey-blue and slanted in a face that was pale but kind of shiny, pearlescent, in the way that wasn't makeup or sweat but just something about what light did on the subtle grain of skin.



Then they went back to looking at the bar, as if nothing had happened, and Braz had to blink back a sense that nothing had until Uñuez clued in to her gaze and waved her over.

Uñuez was wearing a traditional C'harnian black embroidered dress and lace coiffe. Tiny oval glasses sat just beneath eyebags ringed like tree-stumps that puckered as they focused in and out on Braz. (The coiffe hid exactly how much her hair was greying but her solid, shield-shaped face didn't look that old except for those eyes. Braz's parents would have used them as a cautionary tale about reading by torchlight - which was something Braz had seen Uñuez do on more than one occasion. Magic theory, religious devotions, romance novels.)

Her eyes flickered back to the stranger without her face moving. "This is my friend... Ingo Brul," she introduced Braz. It wasn't a name Braz had heard before - Uñuez always made these up on the spot. "Ingo, I've just been getting to know..." there was a pause. It was always an interesting sign if Uñuez paused in making up a name for someone.

"Aeeth. Lacriz Aeeth."



That name wasn't from here. It sounded... Silmenonian?

Uñuez also looked taken aback, even if she corrected too rapidly for anyone but Braz to notice. As if she hadn't expected that name to come out here, at least not so soon.

Uñuez, of course, knew the real names of everyone who stayed at Contour, even if she didn't necessarily give them to each other. The guestbook locked in her desk ran a rare and questionably legal spell that both encrypted and decrypted True Names from the government database. It was in large part the combination of these two capacities that made Contour so respected in certain circles.

"You're a regular," Aeeth asked, in the tone of someone confirming they'd just met a celebrity. "What's the best wine here?"

"She hasn't told you that?"

"She was giving me a long list, and you know, I'm not a wine-taster."

"Then try the Bolduc Sapphire Wine. I guarantee



you've never had anything like it, and you have to at least once in your life."

"All right. One bottle Bolduc Sapphire, for all of us."

Braz's eyes narrowed. "What brings you here, on a mid-week night, on your own, and willing to try the finest wine on the house?" Her gaze crossed over to Uñuez. "Do you know each other?"

"The wine's on the house." Uñuez' gaze was steady. "They're... someone who used to come here. Before your time, even. Someone I was expecting to see back here even less than you. But like I was just telling you I double-drew the Reunion card this morning."

"Those kinds of things aren't real magic, which is why I always say when they work, something real is afoot. And important." Aeeth nodded slowly, while an ice-blond maid who had crept in behind Uñuez opened a cabinet in a hollowed out stump with a tiny silver key.

"But if there's no rule to how important it is - how can that be the work of the Goddess, and not Chaos," Braz pressed. It was a perfectly innocuous take and Braz didn't





mean to come off rigidly orthodox, but she felt there were still things she wasn't being told about this old regular - what had they used to come here for? - and prodding for heretical views was one of her first routines here.

Especially when someone came in wearing a priest's uniform.

"You know, I'm wearing this outfit for pleasure, but I was a real priest for a while. During the time..." Aeeth slowly took a sip of their wine, maintaining their gaze perfectly level with Braz. "...that I wasn't coming here. And the way I see it is, if the Goddess is perfect order, would we - as a manifestation of Chaos - be able to fundamentally understand Her methods? I don't mean that in an irreconciliationist way, I mean - intuitions are also part of the vision of order She gave us, because they're part of treating our whole experience as an ordered system, even if we don't understand it... from the bottom up, like magic."

I nodded. "Esquiez said something like that, right?"

"Right! So you're familiar. The very existence of magic suggests that the Goddess's order does not have the



rigidity of the laws of matter, and there could be infinite layers of more fluid orders...”

“Like the Goddess of Many Folds at Tartus. If you don’t mind my asking - how did you stop being a Priest?”

“Celibacy.” They crossed and uncrossed their legs, tensing and relaxing the latex sleeve around them. “You see I first became interested in the Priesthood when I read *The Red Light of the Moon*. I was like ten!” They laughed like a bell. “I was fantasizing about like, the old Priesthood, you know, the Carnal Confession, when I was... too young to even know what that was, to say the least. But it’s what got me interested in the whole profession! I figured, as I got older, that this wasn’t important to me any more, but eventually I came to realize I had never really been called to celibacy - or the version of the Priesthood that included it. There were people I knew who felt the same and were willing to challenge that rule in the Ecclesia, go through all the different steps for theological referendum, but I can’t imagine myself playing that sort of long game. I quit and now... I do the same thing, except without an official Priesthood. Which is how I ended up at a place like this.”

Braz nodded slowly. “And what did you do at a



place like this before?”

“Are you kidding? It’s a great place to go if you’re a Priest in training. You learn about magic. You learn about sin. You learn about Order and Chaos.”

Braz’s skepticism - of what, she hadn’t been sure - or rather, simply her sense that there was something she didn’t understand in this situation - inverted in an instant. No - I understand this person perfectly - no, not just that - they understand me.

A rattle rose from the wall like a brush on a snare drum. A round of applause from the auditorium of Braz’s soul. Scattered waves of darkness blinked across the bright blue-grey of the windows. “That’s the worst hail this year, at least,” Uñuez remarked.

“Supposed to go from rain, to hail, to snow.”

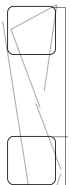
“Last snow of the year.”

“Makes one tempted to run off to Winter City. There it’ll last another month. But I couldn’t reject your hospitality.”



When they went upstairs an hour later - it was amazing that it had taken as much as an hour, it had felt like an hour on some drug other than alcohol, an hour in such complete focus that time lost its barren continuity - they found a ward facing them on the inside of the door of Aeeth's lodgings - a pickled eyeball in a triangular magiglass case with decorative beaded chains hanging from its vertices. The eyeball moved on a track connected to a pendulum that swung in time with a central Regulator (the same function as a Preserver but mechanical, requiring a human Preserver to animate it in a regular ritual) somewhere in the inn. The openness of the ward - the equivalent in a military installation would be concealed, because there were adversaries who knew how to shut them down unnoticed, but it hadn't happened in Braz's time - wasn't a problem, because any damage done to it would rebound through the connection to the regulator and, if Braz recognized this mechanism correctly, knock out everyone in the room.

The reason it was out in the open like this, however, was so they could turn it off if they wanted. A couple of rooms had this function. There were things people liked to do in inn-rooms involving magic. Braz didn't think she would be doing any of the obvious ones - except perhaps





the most obvious. Without revealing anything compromising, Braz had impressed upon Aeeth that she was someone important and closely watched, and Aeeth had volunteered to submit to a memory-wipe spell for their interaction. It felt fundamentally wrong to use a memory-wipe for the precious exchange that was going to pass between them, but it made it too safe to pass up, and otherwise passing it up was going to be torture. Several needs Braz hadn't imagined possible to fulfill in one. Braz waited until the pendulum was at the middle of its arc and pulled. The eyeball turned around in its case, revealing the bronze filigreed cup holding it in place, the ornate mandala centred where the optic nerve would have been.

Aeeth had reached out at the same time as her, and instead of letting their hand fall away as Braz's reached the pendulum first, let their fingers rest on her wrist.

The hail rolled in waves across the windows - a rattle as if the glass itself was about to shake itself apart, then a gentle whisper like a tide retreating over pebbles - there was no reason to believe the hard and soft intervals had a rhythm, and it wasn't like Braz was counting, but she believed they did, that their rhythm was inside its rhythm, or that it was with it, as hers was with Aeeth's, and they



were synchronizing into one, as she kneeled into the sanctuary - the confessional as it was in the old subterranean cathedrals of sweltering Silmenon - (Silmenon wasn't that hot, it was just south of C'harn, but Braz was that kind of C'harnian) - of Aeeth's pink latex ruffles.

Between Aeeth's legs was a slightly ruffled gate, beaded with sweat or lubrication, furred lightly enough that the black hair, which tracked up their stomach past where their robe was lifted and seemed to bristle slightly, was translucent to the pale skin beneath. The only clue Braz had had to this was their mention of the old Silmenonian romances, which rarely featured priests with penises (regardless of gender). The polished wooden ceremonial wand they had handed Braz before the ceremony - engraved at its tip with the Spiral Flame, which pressing up against the engorged, unusually large clitoris that separated the hairs, Braz couldn't help but notice resembled a clitoris itself, something she'd have to ask if they were taught about in the mysteries as they lay together after the Communion.

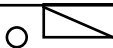
The Spiral Flame represented Chaos in its most positive aspect, of perfect harmony with the Goddess and her rotating dance. But it was an old symbol - it did not





represent the Goddess and the Serpent Chaos as the present Church did, approaching Her from the fringes of the universe. It began from the centre and spiralled out - a movement that in contemporary iconography would have represented the first sin, the Serpent kicked away into the outer abyss by the Goddess' heel in punishment for attempting to usurp her leadership of the dance. But here the flame emanated out. Perhaps Aeeth would tell her this was the arcane meaning of the clitoris itself. The serpent, of course, was both the masculine partner in the Great Arcanum and symbolically phallic; the clitoris was the phallus emerging from the vulva, the flame from the centre of the universe, and in this implement it empowered the phallus itself, the outside granted the authority of its own counterpart from the inside. Braz had always counted herself good at parsing religious symbolism, a skill that despite the third of military exams dedicated to it (albeit strictly in contemporary, orthodox forms, not antique curiosities like the Carnal Communion) she had always felt was wasted on her.

Braz held the wand between hands clasped in a prayer position. The light of the room filtered in dim curtains through the pink latex (and shadows of black) around her. It parsed a hotter reddish on her skin - as if illuminat-



ed through blood vessels.

Aeeth's sinewy legs trembled - as if they weren't quite used to standing like this, with a confessor's lips so close to them, in a precise and unflinching 42 degree arch. The arches of their feet - where again the gentle bristly hairs rose from their otherwise bare legs - faltering beneath them.

"Your name," Aeeth's voice filtered through the dark above the gate.

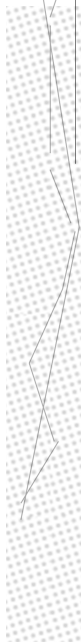
A shiver struck Braz like lightning, from the top of her head to the shifting pink-gold-red floor.

If Aeeth had bared themselves - if she was going to - she was going to have to bare herself entirely.

If she was even going to confess what she had come to confess here.

"Raihha Braz."

The confidentiality of the confessional, in theory, trumped military confidentiality. Even the highest state secrets could be revealed to one's confessor - hence why military priests were typically recruited from highly se-





cluded monastic orders whose very existence was often a secret. But Braz knew - because she oversaw some of the operations that filtered information through them - that this confidentiality was not sacred as far as operations as sensitive as hers were concerned. Her own priest almost certainly monitored her on behalf of higher authorities - the Ecclesiastical Council, possibly Shaïgnar.

So there were things she'd never told him. And for someone like Braz, who had diligently confessed every hint of a sin since she was capable of understanding the concept, such a secret felt like a bolus of spit growing in her throat.

"And what secret burns in the void at the centre of your heart."

As someone who worked with secrets, she had no concept of that kind of secrecy. The secrets she was privy to she spent half her time talking about - the people who knew them did nothing but talk about them. They were secrets that existed to be talked about - they would not have existed if people didn't talk about them.

That wasn't, she had realized at some point, what the word secret meant to the rest of the world.



Even in an ordinary church, the confession booth felt something like this - the light through ruffled pink and red curtains - the trapped eddies of air - the priest's face unseen, only their hands reaching in - the bowl of red-tinged salt water and the bowl of pure - it was supposed to represent the inside of a heart, though a womb made as much sense. The place where you were only yourself. The place where you were in secret. Visiting that place for the first time as a child implanted the very idea that you had one, that your secrets weren't some sort of anomaly, a tear in reality that might eat everything precious to you.

Braz had secrets everybody talked about, and secrets she couldn't even bring to the inside of her own heart.

"I love..."

She faltered.

Was it even true? Was she projecting some intrusive thought, some perverse what-if, into the inner sanctum of her self? Her psychological training had primed her to detect any such internal confusion and dishonesty, but the habit of denial rose in her from the sanctuary of time. She hadn't been here, really been here, in the con-





fessional, in her heart, since... she had been here, at Con-
tour...

“Push.” Aeeth’s voice muffled by the layers of la-
tex between them.

She opened her mouth, faltered, and lifted her
hands. The hollows on the inside of Aeeth’s thighs light-
ened in anticipation. Their clitoris raised its head proudly
as their lips widened. The spiral flame, alone, had disap-
peared. Braz closed her mouth again, and pushed. The
head disappeared, and a breath shuddered through Aeeth,
the latex shifting subtly as they swayed. Wetness already
glistened on the wood when Braz pulled back. Braz ex-
haled, and when she next lifted it, couldn’t help but slip
one of her hands out of its prayer position, running her
soft but thick fingertips along the goosebumped edge of
Aeeth’s labia as they peeled back, slipping into velvet and
honey, as Aeeth’s knees began to bend, and that clitoris
like the prow of a ship descended towards the tip of her
nose...

Wet on the tip of her nose.

Hair brushing.



Letting her eyelids close to a curtain.

The flex those muscles forced down into her knuckles, the heat of her palms on the wood itself an erotic contact.

Short, deep grunts from above, as those rising and falling hips forced air from her like a bellows, squatting on her pump.

“You love.” This time it comes from above like an order.

Bubbles of vacuum were being pushed between them. The words she wanted to say, not yet even formed, like a bolus from her stomach, were being pushed out through her. She’d never understood why she’d pleasure the Priest in this stage, instead of letting the confession be pleased out of her. Most novels these days wrote it that more intuitive way anyway - they weren’t written for people who cared about accuracy. And yet, Aeeth was able to make it work the way it did in the novels in spite of it. They were taking her confession and her wand as if they had been trained to.

“I love...”





Still. Could she really say it?

"I love the [Taboo Preserver]." She pushed. "He who it is my duty to protect... to isolate from the world... from any kind of disturbance or change." As if she was punishing the Priest for daring to ask, to know, to force from her these secrets for which she had come to him, because in the Goddess' religion the first sin was a secret. "That should be fine. I love him as I found him; as he is. His motionless self." That was why the Priests took it - proved they could take it - proved they couldn't be broken by it, the way it broke you - "If I could just tell him that, and not change things by doing that, it would be fine." Now it didn't feel like it was pushing against anything - it was entering, and leaving as quickly as it had entered - feeling the touch of its own movement, the river. "If loving his peaceful self meant my feelings were peaceful." The clitoris was bobbing, rearing up and down, pressing out even further, like... it was getting hard. "But they're not. So I can never tell them." Like Ymañn's penis if she was pushing the wand into him - she gasped. Had Aeeth coaxed that secret out of her too? "So I..." She left off, gasped. Aeeth, inner thighs now vibrating, had taken their last payment of secrets. Wetness that wasn't sweat or Aeeth's juices was now pouring down her face. The mesh of lashes in front of



her eyes was flooded. Her eyes were filled with a deeper release than any other part of her body, even her shoulder muscles now blurred with exertion. It was hitting something at the back now, beating a drum. The latex tent felt like it had been given a gust of fresh air. Her shoulders shook as they thrust. Eventually the resonations came into dissonance, they juddered to a stop and left the wand filling up Aeeth all the way as they sobbed.

The latex rolled back down over her hair, folded back up in front of her, as Aeeth kneeled down in front of her and reached out a vinyl-gloved hand to stroke her shoulder. Their blue-shining raven hair leaned into her soaked cheek.

After caressing her until her tears stopped, they slowly pushed Braz down, their jaw looking more square from beneath, their smile spreading across it like a hair-line fracture. They swept their skirts behind them from all the way over their hips, undisguisedly pale now in the blended light. Another hand down around her belt buckle; brushing against the unforeseeably short and curly hair beneath her panties. Pressing her legs apart until they stretched the cloth.

“Are you prepared to accept forgiveness for your





secret?"

The Spiral Flame pressed up against her inward flame like a question.

The next hour passed in pulsing fire. A worm tunnelling through a sun. She wasn't even sure what was happening. Parts of her body she was barely on speaking terms with knew but were communicating with each other in their own language. She was happy listening in - as if it were the sound of rain. And every time Braz turned her sweaty cheek over onto the pillow, she faced the black nightlight of the window and watched large uneven pancake snowflakes, blue-purple and yellow-green in the light of different unseen lamps on either side, twinkling in and out of visibility and piling up on the sill.

Still, she managed to set an alarm spell before going to sleep, with Aeeth's head in her breasts and her arms around their shoulders.

When she woke up, the windows were just starting to tingle with light, and Aeeth was still asleep, the pillow pulled awkwardly under their neck and chin and arms stretched out to the corners of the raised slab bed they had barely used. As if storing up tension instead of releas-



ing it - it would certainly be satisfying to wake up from sleeping like that, literally pulling oneself together. It was also seductive. She almost jeopardized the whole routine by leaning in to leave an imperceptible kiss on a groove of shoulder muscle.

Braz stretched out herself, lowering her arms until her fingertips touched the floor, and began to circle the bed counterclockwise on all fours, sweeping their fingertips out in arcs to the side and ahead of her weight. They had both been too exhausted to do the memory wipe before sleeping but it hadn't concerned them; no one was allowed to slip out while a ward was deactivated here. Braz, however, was too careful to let Aeeth use their own memory wipe. They hadn't specified, so it wasn't exactly a breach of trust; when Aeeth woke up, they would assume they had done it, and go about their day. Braz would be gone, but they would assume they had said good-bye to her. They wouldn't even remember her face; they would assume they had been too in the mood, had done one more repetition than they needed of the spell or something, or had just been drunk on top of it.

There were ways to cheat on a memory wipe spell without even someone like Braz knowing, if you knew what





you were doing. And there were ways for people like the black ops of the Ecclesia to retrieve “backup” memories from most of the spells someone like Aeeth would know.

If nothing else, she was keeping Aeeth safe. There was no way they had known exactly what they were getting into. No way they could have.

Yet they had taken it well. So well Braz almost wondered if it was necessary to do this. No shock; no disgust; no starblindness, either. No frisson at forbidden love. Just accepting everything; even before they’d started spying on her, she’d never felt a priest accept her so fully.

A week later Luskonneg got his Feed back. He’d been on the chans and boorus so much in the meantime he forgot he even had it for another day and a half. He’d been bingeing the entire works of a doujin artist of two generations ago he’d found out had died - methodically making sure to jack off to every single cumshot. At the end he felt like a mummified corpse, ready to die. He spent half the day in bed waiting for death to take him, imagining all the different personifications of it he’d seen - one of this own artist’s signature creations was a little girl in



a bell-shaped dress that tolled for thee - with a soft, impotent eroticism that sank into his flesh and smoothed him out into a putty. Then he realized it wasn't going to come - at least, not without the usual amount of pain and boredom he had decided years ago he wouldn't be able to bear.

So he ordered two gallon-packs of energy drinks. That would be enough to revive him.

In the meantime, half-awake, he clicked through all the tabs he hadn't closed in the past month, and accidentally discovered his Feed was active again.

He had over the threshold of notifications at which the Feed UI stopped telling you how many notifications you had and just showed the radiating-arrowed Ecclesiastic "Many" symbol. He knew he wouldn't be able to scroll through them without a significant infusion of energy drinks, which were still... 20 minutes away? But beneath the "Many" symbol was a "1" he barely ever saw. A DM notification.

Curious, bordering on perturbed - was he being cancelled again? - he clicked on the envelope icon.





1:35 PM yesterday

omfg thank Goddess you're back! was worried you'd got perma'd finally. would be the worst timing - you won't believe it but I'm finally gonna be in Winter City this coming weekend. I'd love to uhhhh hang out if I can get some time away from my parents. please don't think I'm a creep or anything I am only gay for cute traps.

@Suburbophile

Who was this again?

He tried to place the avi of the beaver mascot from the magical girl/mons crossover show that was also a lowkey tourism advert based on the culture of Western C'harnian mountain country.

Oh right, he'd told this reply guy he would watch that show two months ago and never gotten past the second episode because it was too kidsy.

He had assumed he would be hated for life for that. He had had a whole episode about it.

Needing to get away from parents to hang out, being unironically into Gentle Highland Ranger Patrol



Lucielle... was this a minor?

He felt a frisson first in his dick then in the pit of his stomach. There was zero percent chance he would even reply if his extensive doxing skills proved this to be the case, of course, so he felt already distanced enough from the scenario that he knew he could map it onto a number of his most extreme and guilty doujin scenarios to avoid killing himself over the injustice. It was probably a honeypot anyway, there were full-time trolls who went around trying to do this to people.

Then he remembered this guy had barraged him with magically 18+ locked fanfiction - not doujins, prose fanfiction - of Lucielle after he'd said the first episode sucked ass.

(Between the typing style and the fucking prose erotica, was he sure this guy wasn't a cute trap himself? Yes, obviously, nothing like that would ever happen to him, but he'd be sure to fantasize about it a bunch to compensate for not meeting up or however this would fall through.)

His finger hovered over the reply field.





He tried to click away to another tab.

Goddess damn it he couldn't. He didn't have the energy. He would have to sink himself completely into something else to forget the insanity of this whole scenario, and he didn't have the energy drinks in him yet.

OK, I'll just sit on this until the energy drinks get here. Maybe I'll check out his dox anyway.

He opened his info trawling program. He instantly found a link to an account on Domesday, the Ecclesia's magically-verified real-name social media platform, which Luskonneg himself hadn't used in five years. Llau de Xiau was in fact the same age as himself - no, almost a year older, just with a birthday at the opposite end of the year. He was the heir to a moderately prosperous merchant family in a wealthy satellite of Crach-Houarnez that still lived the old-fashioned lifestyle of half-year trips between the coast and the mountains where Lucielle was set, so that explained that. Most of his Domesday was hiking photos with his parents. He only had 25 friends, and almost all of them were a generation older than him. There was no hint on Domesday of the interests Luskonneg knew from Feed, except a photo of him hugging a plush of the same beaver mon in a tourist shop. The only employment record was an



internship at his parents' business that had barely lasted three months.

Luskonneg felt a brief flush of a superiority he liked to affect to win online arguments. If nothing else, he did not live in his parents' basement. He didn't understand why anyone would in a country that provided universal basic housing. Just move out, what, are you scared to lie in your room completely alone every day, watching the light move over your ceiling like a cleaning robot. Then he would briefly remember his mother pushing him out of the car, telling him he couldn't make such a scene at this age, desperate bargaining, hiccuping sobs, promising he'd gratefully put up with things he'd sworn to never take from anyone again once he was out of her power at ten, threatening suicide and being threatened back with the same. And then he would close his eyes, and forget what he had been thinking about.

There was also a startlingly old account on the video streaming platform Panopticon, with videos of Llau as a prepubescent child, delivering poorly lit commentaries prepared like oratory exams on some of the first internet drama Luskonneg had ever witnessed.

Luskonneg rolled back and closed his eyes to





think. @Suburbophile - he didn't have permission to think of the Feed account by name yet - was someone whose replies were hard to tell if they were ironic or serious. What if he was being trolled, or worse if @Suburbophile hadn't even contemplated the concept that he might take it literally?

(What chance he might take it literally? There was no chance of that - of him taking up the offer, that is. But he'd feel bad about himself for not taking up the offer if he took it literally.)

On the other hand, @Suburbophile was a true blue reply guy. His posts were over 70% replies, and most of them to the same half-dozen people, including Luskon-neg. So it wasn't impossible.

He passed out with his eyes closed, thoughts chasing each other's tails across his eyelids.

When he woke up the energy drinks had arrived on his mail-shelf and he needed one and a half to wake up.

By the time he remembered the message, it had been in his inbox for more than a day.



The wait itself made him take another hour to write his reply. Almost the entire hour was spent staring straight at the text field.

With every second the voices got louder: You waited too long. Do you really want to spend the next two days staring at a sent checkmark until you finally accept it? If you can accept it without hurting yourself or something - remember what happened in high school. Remember all those nights awake staring at your phone. Remember your mom crashing into your room, telling you there was nothing there, you're losing sleep over this, losing your studies over this, waiting for nothing, you will always be waiting for nothing -

Something shook in his mind like a flame.

Or maybe it felt more like a TV channel giving out in a burst of static.

The all-too-familiar thought was interrupted by a sudden disorientation.

What am I doing?

He remembered a meditation program he'd





downloaded at 3 AM one night in high school, trying to calm his nerves. “Ask yourself: what are you doing? Don’t ask in a mean or suspicious way; ask as if you were asking a friend.”

He’d spent the next week asking himself that in the meanest possible ways he could think of, just to spite the program for thinking it could help him. Imagined it in his mom’s voice, his dad’s voice, his principal’s voice, each of the cool gothic lolita girls’ lunch table’s voices.

But he wasn’t doing that now.

It didn’t feel so much like the intimacy of a friendly question, either; it was like he was floating in an endless white space over himself.

Oh, I guess I’m dissociating, huh? Is that what’s happening? And the space answered by becoming his body, huge and alien around him.

It felt like an abandoned factory complex, inert, waiting for him to do something, waiting for him to move. He could wander around, press buttons.

- like what if I just pressed this one that said



“Send” -

He snapped back to reality. Wait wait wait wait -
WHAT the fuck did I just do?!

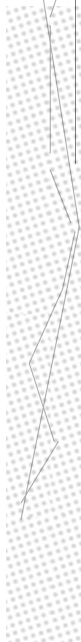
It took another five agonizing minutes - spent curled up in a fetal position under the covers, bargaining with some light or darkness to take him - to even look at the message he had sent. It wasn't good, but he felt strangely resigned to that after sinking so much energy into the anticipation. It cut off midsentence and had a word truncated from where he'd been trying to replace it:

yeah I'd be god for, any tiem basically, I don't exactly do anyth

He knew, from the “K-hole art commission incident”, that Feed didn't let you delete DMs. He'd just have to do damage control - or hope @Suburbophile (Llau? could he think Llau?) wasn't looking at his DMs any more.

In that sense, he had solved the problem of the fear, at least.

He was still leaning back on his wrists, breathing, and processing that thought when the “typing” ellipsis





popped up in the bottom of the inbox.

Luskonneg's face could only have been done justice by the rubberiest of comedy manga.

His fingers, stiff as rigor mortis and shaking like leaves, hovered over the keys, hoping to pre-empt something, but couldn't decide what.

The reply popped out, in its rounded bubble with its rounded notification ding, almost disgustingly, like an egg from the desexualized cloaca of some mon creature: oh wow cool! me neither dw I feel you fr fr. lemme link you my schedule just a sec

...schedule?

The link that popped up next clicked through to a detailed spreadsheet that broke down all the way to fifteen-minute blocks, on a weird site Luskonneg had only seen used for illegal file sharing that allowed you to duplicate and fork files from a more popular cloud hosting service, which happened to have its own calendar function. The forked account was different from the account on the forking site, although they were both under the name "Llau de Xiau". Most of the three days were already filled



up; the first day the Waterfall and the funiculars, and the Sidi cathedral at the highest point of the plateau; the second the jacuzzis, the great library, the rinks, blocked out hour by hour so he would have to be checking his clock everywhere he went. They were colour-coded “with parents” or “alone”; there were restaurant reservations “with parents” every night, but most of the days the parents seemed to be unoccupied except for the most dramatic sights - the funiculars, etc. - which were mostly clustered in the mornings, or evenings after dinner. Luskonneg narrowed his eyes and clicked back to the Feed tab:

Do you have any idea what would work better for you? he typed. I have no idea how to pick between these.

you don't necessarily have to pick! we could hang out as soon as we can, and then... see what you're up for.

What I'm up for. That was another thing Luskonneg had to think about - in ways he wasn't sure he could explain. This guy certainly seemed to think they had similar reclusive tendencies, and from the friend count on Domesday maybe he was right, but living with his parents evidently had one advantage: they kept him used to going outside, seeing people, speaking out loud. If Luskonneg described the experience he'd had during the power out-





age, he felt sure Llau would smile and suggest the company would keep him from getting too caught up in his thoughts, but he had no idea if it would work that way. Focusing rarely worked for him; if he had to think too hard about one thing, like talking in real time!, it didn't stop him from thinking about other things but piled on top of and collapsed them. His university entrance exams had been the most extreme example of this, and while it seemed absurd to compare that - the turning point of his life to date, the culmination of years of effort and crisis over whether he could make effort - to meeting a stranger off Feed he might never see again, this would be the most human contact he'd had since his first winter here.

Am I seriously considering this? I could just tell him I'm sick or something.

As for the possibility of just explaining it in terms of agoraphobia, social anxiety, OCD, the litany of diagnoses that had been thrown at him over the years... Luskoneg had come to Feed from an education on the chans (from such a young age he remembered it alongside his earliest formative experiences of real life). He had brought with him the knowledge that sounding cool is the way to win an argument where no one knows who you are. Be



vague enough about your life, your self, but hint you're more secure in them than your audience and people will just project anything onto you. Of course everybody knew Feed user @moephrenology was a shut-in and a virgin; but he came off like he was only those things because he didn't care not to be. He cultivated the aura of a hidden dragon. That was probably why he had a reply guy like this.

If he particularly cared about having a reply guy like this, there was no way he would risk exposing his true self to them.

But with this guy, he found almost an impulse to do the opposite. After he had fucked up Luskonneg's day with all this enthusiasm, why not come out to meet him with dried dribble down his unshaved lip, the smelly sweater he'd been wearing the whole week, dirty uncut nails, eyes darting, looking like he just woke up from a heroin coma.

He'd accomplish the same thing he knew he'd end up doing if someone got too close online - drive them away - and feel like he had tried something in the process. Feel something in the process. He'd have another box to fill in his imagination in the empty star chart that had





been hanging, curling up and yellowing, since he moved in and his mother slapped it there.

Despite everything else about that one terrifying day, there was something about the afterimage of neon blue sky that had comforted him to come back to, to close his eyes and suspend over his screen or his food or his ceiling.

In that case, it was even more important not to tip his hand before making it out the door. Luskonneg drafted several messages with the precision of a professional email before defaulting to: sure.

at the Winding Bazaar then?

The Winding... wait.

He'd been on a field trip there once - he remembered dashing from one heating column to the next, putting his hands on each one as long as he could get away with, not paying attention to much beyond that - but he literally didn't have a mental map of the city in his head back then, and obviously hadn't had much need to develop one since. But... he had seen the cathedral on the horizon, so... he would have to take the local minirail to get to a



main line, and then...

How long would that be? Twenty minutes? Forty?

He hadn't been taking that into account. Having to be outside without even seeing anybody... without any reward to his fumbling... for that long... no, that wouldn't be possible. Why hadn't he taken that into account before even replying. Maybe there was some other way to do this, but that simply wouldn't be possible.

He closed his eyes until it came to him:

oh man sorry I can't make it that far. I have some kind of weird nervous thing in my legs

Would anyone believe that? It would be fairly easy to affect. He was already searching for more plausible details in another tab.

oh man - a real life sickly moe heroine! no homo.
uhhhh what works for you

He didn't think he could bear going much further than this street. There was the coffeeshop he had already gone out to - and humiliated himself at - that wasn't ideal, but, if he went somewhere else he'd feel more pressure





not to humiliate himself, and would probably humiliate himself more.

Was there anything else on this street? He hadn't remarked last time he'd been out, and things had probably changed since his first year here. He opened the Elthazan Maps app. There was some kind of... antiques store? That was actually right next to him and he'd never noticed it. There was a bar, over on the opposite corner. That would make more sense if they were meeting up in the evening, but Llau's evenings were all booked up. And there was an icemeat stand. A tourist might be into that, but it was usually too heavy for his palate. And an arcade, but a really normie one - Llau would know how much he fucking hated arcade games, considering he had even beefed with arcade Feed leading to one of his most memorable bans, but maybe ironically...?

The possibilities became white noise as they ran into each other. There was nothing, nothing Luskonneg hated more than that white noise. He couldn't get anything out of it when it was there. Is that gonna be there when I try to talk to him? We'll have so many things to talk about, and it won't be like Feed where we just say whatever pops into our heads...



A silence that had to be filled in an instant was a silence that could stretch on forever.

Infinitesimal and infinite time were the same.

Silence and infinite screaming noise were the same.

Feed was a place he had come to - no, the whole internet was a place he had come to - because he never had to experience that silence, that noise, that time.

So until he could think again - until thought could happen to him again - he clicked away to another tab.

Hmmm, yeah, these figs for Ailurons ~Pilot Pussy-cats~ are not up to the standards of their old contractor. And what is this T-shirt, it looks like it was made by some 12-year-old at a walk-in screen printer? Somebody oughta tell the producers to stop stiffing collectors just to pander to phone game casuals... somebody with a whole array of sockpuppet emails for this exact purpose...

Oh yeah, didn't they release a whole spinoff series of five-minute gag shorts I haven't watched yet.





Wow these are bad! It's part of the same degeneration of the franchise! Let me make an image macro comparing Catnip Soft to the decadent court of Silmenon in the fifth century of the Warring Era and post it in the general!

Refresh, refresh, refresh. Nice, this is really racking up replies. I'll keep the momentum going by dunking on these butthurt consoomers defending their products. Maybe I should post this on Feed too...

Oh right, Feed.

Can't think about that now.

Didn't Caveman Girls In A Modern High School update a few days ago?...

Luskonneg had forgotten he had a thing where he couldn't order that many energy drinks without drinking them all one after another.

Once he got into the flow of sipping something, picking it up, putting it down, noticing the dryness of his lips and responding to it automatically, he kept sipping,



until there was nothing left. Normally his laziness and cheapness were all the negative feedback mechanism he needed to stop there, so it wasn't a problem. But if he already had a whole crate of them sitting there...

He couldn't remember how long it had been since he had slept.

His body now felt tired of having energy. The vibrations in his skin and nerves cancelled each other out. He felt leaden with static electricity, stiff and spastic at once. Almost as if he actually did have some kind of weird nervous disability.

And yet... he took another sip. Only one and a half more cans to go.

He'd read somewhere that people did actually die from this, but the possibility didn't feel real to him - like he would be so lucky.

He couldn't even focus on the pages of... a fucking archive of a gag manga from the decade the last Dark Lord had surfaced. How had he ended up here? Running away from something. That same scratching in his skull again.





The light on the ceiling was peach-coloured. Soft, like a jazz chord in a doujin song.

What time was it? What day was it?

His eyes flickered over to the clock in the computer screen.

Evening. The last day of the week.

Well. One more night, and he'd have officially flaked out, wouldn't he. If he hadn't already.

The only problem was - he didn't have it in himself to distract himself any more.

That meant it would be a matter of counting seconds. Dead time. He sighed. Curled up. War of attrition. Which would win - boredom or fear. Fear, obviously. It always did, how else would he live like this. At this point it didn't even feel like fear so much as spite. Spite of himself, spite of anyone else for hoping to change him.

For another strange moment, that certainty felt completely arbitrary.

Fear - white noise. Spite - white noise. He folded



up an accordion of tabs to click back over to Feed, vision so overexposed with energy it felt like his eyes were closed.

you there? flickered into focus. Five hours ago.

He swallowed a bellyful of air. He still hadn't decided what to say. But at this point, whatever he said probably wouldn't be seen anyway.

When he tried to imagine his regret, it just felt like another dull headache.

sorry. i didn't wanna make you come out here. if you still wanna, i'm on Dannbrenn Street between Dwyrr and Gwelhon. can you decide? idk

That was closer to his true self than he'd meant to show this early, but at this point he might not have another chance.

With a movement like a warrior sweeping an ancestral sword down from its rest on the wall of a dojo, he grabbed his last energy drink can off the top of the drawer - not even finishing the half-empty one leaning dangerously against his mattress - and chugged it all in one go,





then stared into the light of the window as it splintered.

He started laughing, and no sound came out.

He slept white, and woke up a few hours later.

Noise that had no power over him.

When he woke up he was staring straight into his Feed inbox. The dark of his room and the dark of his Feed theme were identical - the blue bubbles of the messages facing him floated in midair, in milky indigo sea.

no dude dw I get it

I had no idea you would even respond

and making a decision on the spot like that... well, there's a reason I let my parents schedule most of my trips for me

even though it means I never get to go anywhere I want like maid cafes or anything

there's a maid café in the Winding Bazaar, I wanted to go there with you bc I wouldn't have to tell my parents, I could just say I was walking around



but that's fine. my point is I'm thinking about a post you made... last year? that was something like "a silence that has to be filled in an instant is a silence that could stretch on forever"

so it's fine for you to go quiet for a while. I get that

*how about we meet at the November Thistle Cafe.
right on the corner of Dwyr*

see you at 1:00

?

**?*

hope you see this

no homo

Luskonneg jerked his half-numb hand out of his pants: at this point these no homos were getting irritating.

So was this whole situation. The back of his throat was hellishly dry and so were his tear-ducts.

This faggot had picked the single worst place to meet up. (It hadn't obviously struck him as the worst place





to meet up before this faggot had picked it, but now that he thought about it the reasons were overwhelming.) It wasn't the same day of the week, so hopefully the same cashier wouldn't be there, but... even if nobody recognized him, how much time would he spend just looking over his shoulder. How would he manage a conversation while trying not to have flashbacks. How would he keep his food down.

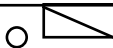
How did this faggot know what he had meant by that post. (He had forgotten he had even posted that. It hadn't even got any likes - not even from this faggot. Coward.)

He'd show this faggot what he'd meant by that post, if it meant throwing up all over the table.

His hands hovered over the keys and felt huge and weightless like nebulae.

sure. see you then.

The morning felt heavy. (The morning meant 11:45.) He was aware of the heaviness of things. Even the



light. Everything felt slow but inevitable.

Everything was trying to weigh him down but it needed to do more than that to scare him.

Despite his initial reasoning, he put a modicum of effort into presenting himself for his meetup - he brushed his teeth, for the first time in a month. (One advantage of all the bullshit in energy drinks was they basically brushed your teeth for you, if the main thing you were concerned about was your teeth feeling fuzzy on your tongue. This time he was doing it mostly just to get the taste out of his mouth.) He put on a new T-shirt - the Slina one he'd left folded for half a year at the bottom of his drawer. He wanted to show it off, but it wasn't T-shirt weather, so he added the thin open woollen cardigan his mom had sent him for Reciprocity Day.

It took him the full hour to do everything, but that made it easier. Facing his usual thoughts felt like grinding low level enemies before a boss fight. It was a fight he was simply resigned to, with a resignation he usually only managed in games - yes, even in games he felt the needles of anxiety, but he could deal with them. A decision in a game mattered and didn't matter at the same time, enough to resign oneself to it. This time, he was resigned





because... because that guy had said he'd felt the same thing, and gone and done this anyway. He couldn't lose to - since when could he not lose to anything? No, there was nothing he couldn't lose to, but he had to go out and lose anyway. Or he'd lose in a part of himself he hadn't known he could lose in.

The heat was oppressive - a few degrees above zero. The snow tryphobic if you looked at it too close. Air tingly with evaporation.

He kept his eyes on the cafe without moving them, homing in and forgetting about his body moving outside his eyesight.

When he pushed through the door there were less people than there had been last time, for obvious reasons which he had forgotten to model. After scanning the floor and not seeing any likely candidates - but then neither of them had figured out any way of identifying each other - he shuffled, almost strafed into the nearest seat by the window, leaned his head on the glass and angled his body away from anyone.

With a sudden flash of inspiration, he shifted his cardigan open so he would be identifiable by the Slina



T-shirt.

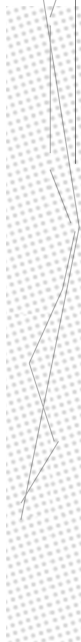
A bus passed by, paused on the opposite corner, and left without any alteration to the corner.

Maybe he wouldn't even come. That wouldn't even be losing, that would be -

From the direction in which the bus had made its next stop, a shape was fluttering down the end of the sidewalk.

There was another advantage to living with your parents - being able to dress.

Llau de Xiau (it had to be OK to think it now, right?) was wearing a brown leather jacket with a thick fur collar over a buttoned-up robin's-egg-blue shirt and pale blue jeans. His light brown hair was bouffant and, in the barely-after-noon sunlight, a painterly gold leaf halo hovering over his somewhat long face with a wide but rounded jaw that fit a wide smile. His eyes were slightly asymmetrical, almost squinting, but Luskonneg grimaced unconsciously at how good he looked, until he got close enough - pressing a buttery forehead up against the window - to see he hadn't shaved very well, there were uneven





spots of stubble on his cheeks and chin. (Luskonneg, on the other hand, hadn't shaved at all.)

Llau made a couple of silly faces in the window, then closed his eyes as Luskonneg stared dully, face frozen, then buried his head in his hands and backed away from the window.

Oh come on, it's not gonna be over this soon- not after we've come this far-

Why was he this surprised? Was this not what he had expected?

Then as Llau backed almost off the sidewalk, two more figures pulled up behind him. One laid a hand on his shoulder.

A tall man - genuinely tall, at least six feet - in a suit, with hair close-cropped on the sides and a kind of mullet, the same long face with bumpy, pockmarked jowls, a business suit with a purple silk bow in place of a tie. His hands were in his pockets as he leaned over Llau's back. A woman - the one touching him - whose face and most of her gray-streaked-chestnut hair was concealed under a wide-brimmed hat, her body wrapped in a fur-rimmed



white coat with pom-poms dangling from collar, sleeves, a Charnian flag pin on her breast pocket.

Luskonneg of course recognized these.

Had they... recognized him yet?

He almost rolled backwards out of his seat, scuttling over to the counter.

The cashier blinked. He didn't think they recognized him? But he probably looked out of his mind either way.

"I'll have a..."

What did he have last time?

"spinach... burger..."

The door slammed open with a sweep of afternoon sun like a prison searchlight. He barely glanced over his shoulder for a split second but it was long enough.

"...you didn't ask for his name?" Elan de Xiau was prodding incredulously at his son, who had shrunk visibly into the collar of his coat.





"I mean, it's good you didn't give him your name, but you should have asked for his," Har'cha de Xiau added, pulling at Llau's elbow.

"just let me handle this - Hey, was anyone here waiting for..."

Luskonneg didn't wait for him to finish. Didn't wait for the cashier to take his order. About a metre had now opened between Llau's mother - the last in - and the door. He bolted around her and through the gap. (A moment of absurd accomplishment in the smoothness of his movement carried him - he felt like a kid playing Warring Era messenger again.) A soft gasp behind him as he angled his shoulder into the still-swinging door and out into the street. Some random guy stopped short to not run into him and he pivoted in the other direction. It was conveniently the direction of his apartment but he didn't stop when he saw his door blur past him on the other side of the street.

He didn't stop until he had made it four blocks down, the farthest he had been in... he didn't bother to remember. He ducked into a convenience store, stumbled all the way down the narrow shelves to hide from the light of the door. The fluorescent light felt as strange as if it was



night. He pressed his hand against the back wall, where glass protected a shelf of wines. His eyes lingered for longer than he would have expected on the colours of the bottles, black and auburn and sea-green, silver and platinum foil, foreign letters, wax paper rosettes. He did remember almost exactly a year and a half since alcohol - it just made him feel trapped and discarded in its fuzzy pocket, not a trap he could chart and pace like his room but numbness as obtrusive as sensation. But the temptation rose up from the back of his brain like a claw. His eyes were wide with need as he grabbed a Blood Bead Red. Sunlight blinked stupidly from the other end of the shelves. Until the cashier called out to ask if he was going to pay he stood and swayed.

And so @moephrenology disappeared from Feed for another several days after coming back from his ban (and barely posting). Despite his only having 743 followers, someone made a meme about it, implying he was too afraid to return to an argument he'd entirely forgotten about having. A comment implied that he must feel simply feel above the site by now, not bothering with the effort of coming back just to get banned again.





@Suburbophile's messages sat in his inbox:

3:45

did you show?

4:03

not sure if that was you but man sorry

I didn't plan for my parents to be there

they got access to my fork of the calendar some-

how

they really wanted to meet you, it... might be best

they didn't?

I made up a bunch of stuff about you I was going
to hope you just played along with

4:30

haha that sounds really stupid

4:48

I guess I am really stupid

EVCI121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WVECEW02
N1NE88V
COMMOD0
B1202
EBV01D0
N1B1CE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20W
0N12
V100V
WVEW
D0GOVE
EL
T0BOVE
N1
TWCID1D0
LEWBOB
E102W0D
D0
WE E111
V01B12C1
10B
2EC1E
WWE1
211
D0GOB
1B20W
T0BEM



6:20

now I'm worried they'll get into my Feed

7:18 AM

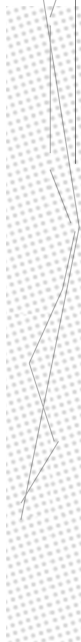
I can explain more if you wanna voice call? I know we haven't done that before either (maybe it'd make up for something?) but I just can't put it in messages

feels like writing a book lol

He didn't want to voice chat, he didn't want to just give Llau the silent treatment either, but the more Llau kept piling on the harder it became to split the difference. Well, he did want to give Llau the silent treatment, humiliate him as much as he had been humiliated, but he didn't want to lose him over that - not even as a trivial mutual. He wanted things to go back to normal without any effort.

Struck by the thought, he opened a new text post.

"Episodic shows aren't my favourites but I wouldn't mind my life being one, you know. Just go back to the status quo after every episode. My status quo is pretty stupid tbh but all my episodes are stupider."





Two minutes later - @Suburbophile liked your post.

Nothing more needed to be said.

Braz felt sick.

However much it might look they had gotten control of it, the cat was out of the bag. The toothpaste was out of the tube. There was no undoing entropy.

The Dark Lord's magical powers, his raw strength, weren't the only thing that made him the Dark Lord. The psychological manipulation of the Dark Lord had first been greenlit because even if it didn't stop him from awakening, it might contain at least one of the things that made him dangerous. The Dark Lord commanded globe-spanning legions of selfish, fickle, unreliable Dark forces with the aid of an almost superhuman charisma. Handicapping this to the extent of allowing him to command attention even like a normal person would have been an impressive achievement, let alone what they had managed to do.

Or rather, that would have been impossible - it



was possible to make him alienate people, or himself, but not to make him not attract them. Whatever balance thus achieved was irreducibly, non-linearly different from an ordinary person's balance. They had achieved the former with such success that the latter, more or less since he moved out, was no longer a concern. When it had been, controlling him had been a much more expensive and delicate undertaking, requiring far more controlled environments, full-time actors and monitors and agents on call with hastily scrawled instructions from the [Taboo Preserver]. This had been before Braz's time. She'd only once ever touched one of those Ninth-Coil-Sealed Post-It notes looped in green-blue glitter pen rounded and narrow with sudden crooked corners. Before she'd met Ymaññ, she'd looked forward to handling those, or steadying the Preserver's trembling voice, as the most exciting part of the job; but instead she'd found easy days, jealously guarded bleary moments, melodies half-remembered from the few unoccupied moments of sleep, drooping stubble and eye buried in dog's haunch, brain teasers from an RSS feed. Now she'd get to experience that youthful dream and wouldn't even be looking forward to it. Sometime in the next week she'd pull out of Crach-Houarnez to spend extra time in the tunnel-complex of the Preserver's bunker and supervise gangstalking training maneuvers. Everyone





would be buzzing with apprehensive whispers like the weekend the power had gone out, but for months, simultaneously not fully convinced the threat wouldn't lift tomorrow and half expecting it all to end for good.

It wouldn't be over soon, but she would have to tell herself it would be over.

Because that man was coming back. That someone with such a loyalty built up over a simple Feed follow hadn't been screened until he was in Luskonneg's DMs was already a major failure. They hadn't broken feelings like that in a single incident. And Luskonneg's loneliness... what if he started to feel it as loneliness again?



Name: Bettany John

Birthday: March 28th

Sex: Semifemale (Born with a condition common in neotene stock (due to side effects of their eponymous neoteny); sterility and the lack of a defined sex. This is relatively normal, and she was raised female since birth.)

Occupation: Ilian haruspex; prefect role

Likes: Wool, perfume, cardamom, beef, long baths, the upper hand, gardening

Dislikes:: Weather, sports, insecurity, blind trust, unfamiliar bedrooms, the taste of water

Blood type: B

Seen with: Senior Savanni staff, the lawship crew, Henarl in particular



A solitary and cool young woman hailing from the midst of the wheel - her hometown is a small mining outpost past its prime, already having begun planning for the ghost-town process of relocation by the time she was a child. Dissatisfied with small-town life, she took one of the only routes Ilion provides out of the isolation it was partially founded upon: a



career that travels.

Very detached from her own life in many ways; maintains a brisk and careless persona. The heart of a classical tsundere; a mind sharp enough to not take that fully seriously. A shamelessly driven social climber, enjoys the small luxuries and a modest, well-kempt interior life. Self-aware, optimistic, but deeply, fatally pragmatic.

LUCIF121
AER
TUCN2
UCCNM20W
WAECEM02
010EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
B001D0
001BICE2
22E
002FEND1
0012
011000
00300
D0GOBE
E1
T0BOBE
W1 01
1WC1D1D0
1EMFOR
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE EG11'
0D1B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0WEL'
211
D0GOB
1B20W
T0BEM



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.

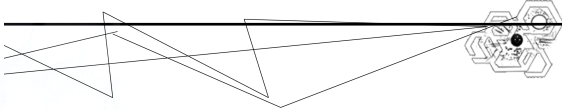


Last Time

preliminary interviews reveal tensions between the various actors, but cannot account for the strange energies beckoning from savannah's interior

ENCIGI21
AER
ENC2
GCCN20N
WCECEN02
010E88V
CONMOD0
ENC2
CMAID0
111BICE2
SSE
S0SLEND1
1BS0W
0012
0100V
WCE0V
D0G0VE
E1
G0B0VE
W1 01
1MCIDID0
LEMB0V
E102W0D
S0D D0
W0 E011'
0DIBI2CI
10V
CONSECI0
0W01'
S11
D0G0V
1BS0W
G0B0W





SUN: Yeah, but it's gonna be the hundredth year soon.

BASIS: Feh. Supposing you lot even managed to count right.

BASIS gestures absently to the continuing rain outside the hut. **SEA** pouts, visibly exasperated.

SEA: Look, I'm sorry, but we're not here to argue about the future or anything. We just need the family's credentials, and then we can be on our way, back to port. Okay? All we want is a few trinkets, they don't even mean anything to you! Are you, like, asking for money? You have to spell it out, but we can talk! You don't needa live in this swamp, or –

BASIS: Still don't know nothin' about that, so get on to port after all. Get back to your storybooks, too. I'm happy where I am, and you can't buy somethin' that ain't there! I'm sick of idiots like you comin' around knocking! It's shameful, to act the way you do.



SUN: Don't be mean, old man. Just help us out.

BASIS: I can be meaner yet to you folk, if you keep talking 'hundred years, hundred years'. It's been done for a hundred years! It's all gone, all starved, nothing left but scrap and stories.

SEA: Well, that's wrong, but... pleeease mister, just work with us! One last charity!

BASIS picks up his book and lies down, reading in a way that covers his face.

BASIS: Things don't work like that any more.

SKY joins in for the first time, the room turning to face her in surprise.

SKY: A spear still flies in wind, and we are going north. The repairs are done soon. This is our last stop afore we hit Habana. The tower stands. We demand nothing. This is only a chance to expedite the process.

BASIS sits up and scowls. His face perplexedly moves between anger, fear, wariness.

BASIS: Bull. The old capital's under a mile of sea, not even



mentioning the sites.

SUN: So what! We got a carrier and the cranes are huge.

BASIS: Ha! So you are fools! Your old warboat can barely hold together as it is, we all saw the hull. Now what, you'll launch some old explosive deathtrap off of it?

SUN: Yeah.

A thick silence. The group faces the baffled BASIS expectantly. SUN fidgets, Their smile radiant.

Sea and Sky Azure Hyperballad, Act LXXV, Scene 6 Pine Road and the estate of set Hill Head

Usas identified god with gold, but her first teachings were inscribed on slabs of jade. The scepters and flagstones of the Triple Alliance were cast in gold, but their palaces were nonetheless called "houses of jade" at the time Sofia sheltered in them. Shinmu's honor guard carried arrows tipped with jade, and even well towards the present and the emergence of the one See – in Anklik, scholars mark "Jade" as a potential pre-Delphic name of Noe. Jade was worked by humans since

RECORD III



*the dawn of history, and undeniably enmeshed in each step of
our messianic history. Some mines have stood since the first
industrious few walked from the walls of Babylon, east to the
steppe and mountains.*

*Where gold is power, glory, and stature, jade is mystery and
magic. God and sun and gold are the same, representing
a fundamental sameness in the idea of light, yet for every
question gold provides an easy answer, to jade raises ten more.
Gold is familiar, but early cultures could find nothing in the
world like jade. Its spiritual properties made it feared and re-
vered, used only in rare instruments and priceless ornaments,
kept there by its scarcity and an overwhelming taboo.*

Centuries later, modern theology would eventually identify it as the ley mineral. But until that point its effects were ascribed to the power of seers, of miracle-wielding warlords, of capricious spirits. Even when industrial applications began to stabilize in the 1800s, this reputation remained: the green fairy, burning verdant from the canaried reactors. It would take the sun blinking out for the spell to break, for the mastery of wormwood to be achieved.

The Sickly Star: Industry and the Deluge Crisis [APOSTATIZED]



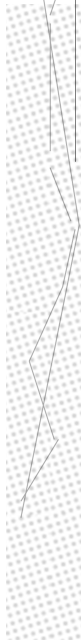
Record III

in which our lieutenant eats, dreams, and makes ready

Perhaps a hundred staff members were present for the executive brunch. The ones whose faces I knew, a smattering of lunics from Sever Malice's unending retinue, and the rainbow of strange Triaction bodies and faces. The crowd bubbled, colorful and bright, and put all the debriefs and introductions to shame.

"So now you see why I've been so busy?" Bettany whispered from next to me. I nodded, and continued scanning the crowd.

The room was cathedral-sized, and filled with glass and arches beside. I would have expected to see an altar where the dias and main screen lay on the far wall, sandwiched between two glass walls in a wishbone arc. Behind the glass was a swaying field of yellow grass and red flowers, lit by true sunlight that must have been reflected in from the receptor. We were close, after all - both here, the con-





ference hall, and the receptor office lay in the central zone of the habitat, ringing the central spoke and housing the most important installations. The scale of this room, the statues I had seen before - it was built to impress.

And, sure enough, in the orange light of the floor-foliage Henarl was enthralled. He could barely hold his attention to his conversation, pausing every few seconds to gawk at the grass in the breeze. How he was so excited, I'd never know; the scale of this room was just enough to recall the unsettling scale of Savannah without sparking outright nausea. A faint reminder of the overlook lurch somewhere in my stomance.

For my part, my eye was fixed on Tacimarsa. She was as she was each time I saw her - quiet, passing unnoticed through crowds and behind backs, speaking low and tense with seemingly random members of staff. At the moment, it was a surly-looking, crocodile-scaled man by the bar.

"Oh, I see!" burst out Henarl from next to us, loud enough to distract me. "I was confused. Of course they are still calling for understudies. It must have been some journey, speaking from experience."

"Well, yes, there's regular flights out. I, for my part, my



coterie grew up on the liners between Near Victory and Diadem,” the lunic boy he was speaking with said airily. His name was Rain Flower, of some sel family I did not recognize, and was one of the few people on staff who looked even younger than we. “So, the flight out here was just a change of scenery! Travel, darling, was the least of my concerns when there was an opening with the master. An irrepressible vision - anyone back home, in the proper circles, can see it.”

“It’s been quite the thing to see. I saw the interior for the first time, you know, knocked us right over. And our liuetenant had it even worse! Irrepressible, indeed, and it looks many more will soon have the chance to be stunned.”

“Stunned! Yes, you should be excited to be here.” He glanced over to me, drawing his sparkling shawl a bit closer around his shoulders, with an unintentional nervous pout. “We’re - excited - about the attention, of course. It’s a strange place, the wheel.”

Henarl nodded, comically serious. “Of course. Of course.”

Bettany was at my shoulder. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes.”





"Then you agree?" She gestured with her chin across the room, still feigning small talk with me, that casual smile on her face. "Shocking, but our dear speaker was right. It's a cult, I hope you're seeing why."

"Of course she was right. We all should have guessed, with a place like this."

She idly squeezed her cocktail as she spoke; I had half a mind to confiscate it before she burst the bag. "She stayed up all night again, you know."

"I of all. We're glad at least you are managing rest.."

Henarl and Flower laughed again, louder again. It was oppressive here, the beautiful glass creating a funnel of echoes noise that seemed to be raining down on us.

The more I saw Savannah, the more it came to be clear. How the staff fit together, the distinctions between them - the lunic community clustered around power and construction, the changelings to genetics and homeostasis. My first impressions were of a strange diversity, but no, it was the opposite - a joint project between the academic cults of Triactis and a disenfranchised splinter of the Board, hiding in genericness and hoping to be overlooked. By all



signs, it had worked, hence the choice of auditors.

There were under a hundred solar folk on staff - were they too of some apostate sect run afoul of the Mikad@'s court?

It made sense. Across the room, I watched Sever Malice gingerly pick his way through the crowd, carrying his permanent look of slight disgust.

"Look, look at him there," Bettany said, nudging me in a different direction with her foot. "I want you to watch Cote the whole brunch, Sever we will get to. See! Everyone he touches flinches."

I nodded, finding the old man in the crowd. Sure enough, the group of women (each in the same clerical uniform, and each with loose iridescent hair) he spoke with laughed, hiding their nervousness reasonably well. But I could see that they were tensed, they were simpering... I hoped it was not fear. "So, what is it?" I said. "I still say the abstellars are not involved. They were a dying breed even during Redname's time, and we know everything about her route to ending up here. Any ideology she has is... very personal, clouded by her history. She is a follower, not a leader. And, even then, it would be no familiar breed of abstellar to tolerate inner-systemers."





As we spoke, I continued scanning the room - Tacimarsa had already gone.

"No solars on staff, remember."

"There's a handful, there's involvement to be sure. Notes cribbed from New Medina, consultants who worked with its construction. Inevitable, really, perhaps a 'refugee' group as set Pearl Wall's is. I've no idea if they are influential, I would like to know."

"Yes... yes, that is a wildcard," she admitted. "But if I speak honestly, the Weylboom connection is so overwhelming I can scarce imagine anything else. But the censure process was so uncommonly thorough. Surely, not one soul could cling to their creed after seeing its results. It must be something else. My wager is vitalists."

One of the smallest, most harmless sects recorded. Changelings hoping to put their brains into dolphin bodies, as far as I'd heard, as proscribed and unrealistic as one would imagine. "I don't see how it connects, but they were a subset of the Weylbloom staff. Tell me, has Tacimarsa yet attended one of these events?" I'd seen her before, but she had vanished while my eyes were on the old men.



She nodded with a smile. "Almost never. Stops in, once in a while, to whisper with dear leader and attend to his health. I don't like that, either."

"He... the Weylbloom treatments, they couldn't be in the same..."

"The same procedures? No, I'm confident no. Weylbloom's life extension was only tangentially medical; the mechanism was direct modification of soul. The treatments here are advanced, but they simply would not have the capability. We'd be able to feel it in more than simple sourness. He's just a normal old man with a whole hospital dedicated to him."

"Hm." None of my subjects thus far had registered as particularly devoted to Coteschinoeleon. There were the portraits in the receptor offices, Dr. Savelyevna's may-be-friendship with Tacimarsa. But the way she spoke of her, and the way Beckon Bell had spoken of Coteschinoeleon... they had both sounded hesitant. Evasive. I would have to verify later, but those two, at least, were neither afraid nor fawning. I hoped that meant they were influential yet unindoctrinated, and not ringleaders themselves. And Redname, for her part, had been so upset about the status quo that it was clear she felt as if she had few an-





swers; even her esteem towards her Triaction sponsors was as that between roommates.

I had to speak to someone closer, and my eyes kept drifting back to Sever Malice.

He still hung in the middle of the room, able to navigate the unweight with a grace unseen in the rest of the staff. He was dressed in a brilliant garment I could not even guess at the name of, a flowing mass of lace and silk and straps that enveloped him like a cloud. All silver, black, and yet again, superfluous ultraviolet. His face was made up like a statue, so masterfully carved that its emotions seemed to make the rest of the world grow paler.

He caught me looking, glared, and theatrically swept himself and his ensemble to face exactly away from us.

“Emelry, I need to ask something of you,” Bettany said when he was no longer looking back.

“Of course.”

“I’d like you to act excited?”

“You’ll have to spell this one out for me, prefect.”



"Well, old Cote is moving his way across the room now," she nodded upwards to the opposite wall, where a small crowd was still welcoming him to the room, "and I assume he'd like to chat with the girls who've a knife to his gut. So, will you please play fangirl for me?"

"Well enough, if I'm allowed to be polite about it. I won't start fawning."

"Oh, of course not. You're the mean one of the crew, you know, chip on your shoulder."

I rolled my eyes.

"See! But I mean it, Emelry." Her tone chilled, even as her manner remained as inconspicuously chatty as it had been. She spoke so quick. "I'd like you to be surly but polite, clearly unwilling to speak with him but magnetically interested in the workings of Savannah. You're being such a zealot right now because you've spun a tale for yourself that you've something to prove. You're fanatic, defensive, status-concerned. But it's all fueled by curiosity, a wonder at the grandeur of the habitat!" She smiled. "It won't even be that far from the truth."

"Really? If you're only going to insult me, at the least





could we “

“I’m not.” She dropped the pretense of politeness. “You’re not an idiot, Emelry. This is what we’ve been doing here. It’s a cult. I meant it, we have to be as small as we can. I need the narrative, lieutenant, I’ll beg for it. Show them they have a way to buy you, and they’ll suspect you that much less”

We stared each other down, faces frozen, until Henarl nudged me in the shoulder. “You two.”

I smiled, broad and just this side of forced. “Yes?”

“Cote’s arrived.”

The man himself was here.

He truly was like a ghost. He was turquoise, his skin so pale it seemed translucent, spectral. One did not typically see the like of this complexion outside of void-adaptilians; rather than muscle and skin, he seemed to have a thick, gel-like veneer across his entire body. His uniform was unadorned by any mark of leadership, it was the same plain airy cotton that the staff - save, predictably, the fashion-aware lunics - typically wore. The cloth seemed to fold



in a bit too far when creased.

"Ah, prefect Bettany!" He smiled nimbly, blissfully unbothered by the painful-looking tubes and wires snaking through his clothes. "You're here early. That's very good. And you've brought the lieutenant! Even better. Tell me, miss Sainshand, is she the last I've gotten a chance to talk with?"

Bettany spoke for me, cheery and relieved. "Yes, teacher-well, her and Didion. He's our scribe, and you come to expect some shyness from the role. But, here we are! Emelry Sainshand, Coteshinoeleon."

"I've been looking forward, so much to meeting you," he said, holding his smile and taking my hand. Henarl had managed to explain to me the tradition of handshake, but feeling mine in his was still bizarre. "You've been kicking up a storm already, I heard? Glad you're bringing the energy."

Well, the spotlight was on. I crossed my arms. "Only my due diligence. Honored to meet you, teacher. I'm glad to be here, and quite eager to jump into my duties. An audit should be efficient, from the first."





“Straight to business!” He laughed, Bettany joining him with a polite chuckle. “Just as I’d expect, good. We appreciate your diligence plenty - I’m looking forward to seeing your process, that impressive pedigree at work. You run into a lot of Sainshands, if you read up just a little on how audits work.”

“Aha, Bettany has been gossiping, I see.” I scoffed, doing my best to lighten the strange mood. “It’s no dynasty, really; butchers pass their shops down.”

A beat of quiet. “Why is this the only thing you can find humbleness for?” Bettany said, and they laughed to end the silence. I let myself join in.

“Well, teacher. Now that we are some acquainted, I’d like again to schedule our preliminary. Your station, I’m sure, is busy - but I am always eager to move forward..”

“No question, no question. It’s a big time. I mean, today is the day! The first wave of promotionals has been a great undertaking, you can imagine how hectic and exciting things are. And you’ve heard Anyn speak of it; he of everyone has been working overtime... there’s a lot of catching up to do. Of course I’d like to schedule, soon as I am able... really, it’s so promising you’ve come when you have.



I'll say, when Taci and I first settled here long-term, after all the drama, I couldn't have imagined this place working as well as it does now."

"And you even came from Saniasa, no?" Bettany chimed, and leaned in. "We still need to exchange some stories about the city. It's great you had the chance to see it, it's built so rare that non-neotenes can appreciate it! I shan't see it for another three years, but even that seems an age."

They turned away from me, having dodged the question entirely, and at last I witnessed the famous rapport Bettany had been so desperately cultivating. I perched there, now fiddling with my own drink, as they talked of the city, of arriving in new places, of the grandeur of discovery - I let them prattle together, making note of his tendence to ramble, gesture, and come to very few real points but quite many pointed . After what seemed like hours, a clap rang out from the other side of the room.

Anyndelhataman clung to the side of the great screen at the other end of the room, waving like a sailor as the occasional system light whirred awake. "Hey, hello, everybody attention please! I think we're all ready now... if we could get the lights, Pymin... great!"





A staff member fiddled with the controls, and the room's lights dipped dim - something about the light was unsettling. It felt like a rare middle-point of light, the dull gold from the yawning glass walls against the cold dark blue of the inner screens.

Where had he come from? Cote was suddenly next to me, conspiratorial. "Room a bit too wide, is it?" He must have caught the discomfort in my face. "I don't know why they built it this way either, you should take it up with the real mastermind. I'm not a fan, either. Unbalanced light, all that grass clouding things up for drying out. Hm."

Before I could think of how to respond, the room rang out in scattered cheers, polite clapping, as the screen flared up with the Triaction butterfly seal. Anyndel grinned his playful tiger's grin, "Ahem!", and Coteshinoeleon loomed right next to me, his eyes like heavy iron wherever they settled.

"Thanks for making it to another great brunch, everyone! Really, really glad to have you here, especially our guests

" Anyndelhataman gestured straight to us. Everyone clapped, perhaps a bit less enthused than he, And Coteshinoeleon nodded to them all from next to me. "The audit really is a gamechanger for us, can't overstate that. A complete shift in our position and progress! This, all this,



means the real start of Phase Three. We're here, folks, we really are."

The room murmured happily at that — we among the crew had heard talk of the 'phases' often. Formulation, Iteration; Publication was the third of five phases, followed by Propagation and Realization. All corporate code-words, we were still making sense of their layered meanings. But three, anyone on staff could tell you, was monumental. The halfway point of the long journey.

"We have so far to go, you guys. I'm so excited to face it with you. Well, I'll throw you in blind! Our first wide-release promotion is running... now!" The lights finished fading, the fields of grass suddenly dark as the sea.

The screen slowly came to life, poignant, tinkling music fading in from black over the voice of a much younger Sever Malice.

He was almost unrecognizable. Across the room he was gaunt, his frame stretched to a brittle plastic break, most definitely a peer of Coteshinoeleon's. But here, on screen, he was in his prime, the flower of his youth. He was resplendent in full Board regalia, perfectly coiffed and gleaming hair dancing about his shoulders in the soft pink





light. It was the same rose-tint as Diadem's glass sky - long before his exile. "Habitats," he said, to an interviewer off-screen, "are named as people are."

"Habitats must be built to have a history. Character is the paramount concern of an architect; personality. Color, shape, temperament, each a quality of the human body that must be echoed and upheld in a habitat. There are some habitats one could easily identify as gold or silver, male or female. Noble habitats built to foster nobility, others perfectly adapted to foreign spirits. Each has a history, a character-of-culture, that progresses as a human life does. People are reflected within themselves..

"So it is for cities. But not for worlds. You've asked my opinion on New Medina, and I do admire it. But it is not Hightower-built, it's a fact. Speaking as a former understudy on the very project, it suffers from a shocking dearth of imagination, of personality." Someone off-camera laughed, and Sever waved it away with a demure magnanimous smile. "Really, though, la! It is grand, but what is it? Only a facsimile of veldt and waste and rain. There are no plans for its blank slate, no identity to build on. Of course, this is the object when dealing with certain among the See..." More laughs, a high female one piercing the



murmur.

Sever all but purred behind his fan. He snapped it shut and continued, more sober. "While an architect cannot forgive a lack of color, I do understand the deficit. It is a world, after all, that is the one true accomplishment, and perhaps its scale was thought to demand it generic. An abstract openness - I understand it. But oh, it is so easy to dream for more.

"Heath' is not the name of a person. It means something different. By way of its natural grandeur, blue jewel and red land - it contains, describes our entire foundation of spirit. Too many stories, too much color. It is not named as a person but as a species; where and what the species is. Could the canopy say the same, in another hundred years? Could Lune say it, had it been named Waste, or Sea? I enjoy that, the land-name. Call all of dysonspace Light, a dream of Ares matured to a hearty Taiga. Why should we hesitate? Why shy from the boldness of naming our works equal to the heaths of Eden? What I dream of holding in my hands... is the Savannah."

And the music swelled full, cutting to sweeping drone footage. Bits of it I recognized; the same plains and rivers and herds of the interior, and of life in the caps. There





was the reactor complex, busy with staff moving through its gardens but there too were the emptier parts of the place, the ghost-resorts, mocked up to be bustling with people of all shapes and colors, bands playing and birds flying among its balustrades.

Coteshinoeleon's voice, fraught and steady and deep, closed out the video. Over a kaleidoscope of color and scenery he spoke, "The world's largest ecological reserve. An unlimited testbed of genetic innovation. Land, weather, geology, built into history's greatest monument." The montage came to an end, and left us with a healthier-looking Coteshinoelon, in a great green weighted building. It seemed to be a greenhouse of the interior. He paced by a railing over a pit, a pit that held a miniature, diorama-view of Savanni wildlife tumbling about - only flashes were visible. Miniaturized gazelle herds, bonzai groves with whimsical treehouses mocked up in them. He planted his hands on the metal, gestured grandly over the scene; "We have passed the time of frontiers - ours is the time of canvases. Savannah: the painted land."

As he spoke, the butterfly seal bled back into the picture until it was all that was left. The logo faded in turn, and left us with an increasingly distant view of Savannah, spinning



alone in the void. The lights rose, and the crowd exploded.

Bettany clapped loud and proud and steady, and I joined her as best I could. Coteshinoeleon smiled, still watching the black screen before us as the light hit his face again. The staff were electrified in parts, feigning excitement in others - but he, he stared as if through the wall, miles away.

When quiet fell and Anyndelhataman began taking questions, he clapped his hands and turned back to us. "And there we are. So? Impressions? I'd love to hear an outsider's perspective."

Bettany nodded, "This is the very first publicly released piece?"

"Outside of some nonsense footage sent to the regulatory bodies, yes. I know some rumors have been swirling... especially in Diadem. Hopefully this will shed some light, open some doors. Stir the pot, if we can."

"Well, it will certainly do that. A taste of the beauty possible here, and the start with set Pearl Wall is bold! It emphasizes what a historical project this is."





"Ah, I'm very glad. The legacy aspect has been one of the trickiest. How does one emphasize the real weight of a century-long project? I say, through the lives of those who have been with it the longest. "What are the next steps for releases?" I asked. "Straight to virtual tours?"

"I believe we can answer that." Coteneoshinoeleon smiled, and swept back to the room — only craning his neck for a moment before Anyndelhataman, who had been talking with a frustrated-looking Sever Malice, caught the gesture and hurried over. Sever followed in his trail, and lingered on the edges of our forming group

No one spoke before Coteshinoeleon did.

"Ah, Anyndel! How are you feeling?"

"Excited, teacher! I've watched that at my desk maybe five hundred times this week, but on the big screen! I'm proud, teacher."

"Wonderful. We were just discussing the roadmap for Phase Three, and knew you'd have some insight," Coteshinoeleon said, and Anyndelhataman nodded vigorously along. "And Sever, come, why don't you ingratiate yourself? It's a good day."



"Thank you," Sever said dryly. Anyndelhataman fidgeted next to him, dwarfed despite his own hefty stature by that dizzying lunic height. He looked unsure as to whether he was allowed to speak; Coteshinoeleon nodded to him when it was clear Sever Malice had nothing more to say.

"For the record, it's still being edited. But it's a strong first draft. We're trying to work in as much archival footage as possible. What did you think, set? Done you justice?"

"I'm glad you kept the laugh, in, they'll hate it." A smirk threatened to pass over Sever Malice's leathery face, but did not. "Though, I still don't see why it couldn't have featured a more recent seminar, actually filmed on-site. It's a bit exoticizing, isn't it? The tone of a postmortem hagiography."

"Well, it will serve as one one day. Won't it, old friend?" Coteshinoeleon patted him gently on the back - and he flinched. "We're all getting up there, on the countdown or close to it. But we are seeing these great days, no? All I could have asked."

His smile was stuck onto his face. I spoke up, as light and polite as could be. "Coteshinoeleon, I'd like again to work a plan of scheduling. You are the chief priest of Savan-





nah's staff - speaking as one of a crew of priests, I have been curious about your theological standpoint. It must take a great faith to build the ethos of a place such as Savannah."

"I assure you, he has not ministered in quite some time," said Sever.

Coteshinoeleon laughed, "Chief priest! It does seem a silly title, sometimes, just a relic from the early days. Yes, I do technically oversee Savannah, but I passed on the duties to my successors long ago. My doors are open. But for things like that, you'd be better served with Taci, or even Anyndel."

"Sainshand, please," Bettany huffed. "I'm sorry."

"I get it! She's very keen. But let's enjoy brunch, lieutenant. I won't put it off forever, but all of us are busy. You, with your preparations as well. It would be a great help if we deferred to, say, after your visit to the surface." His eye twinkled. "Did you notice the glimpse? The fields, the greenhouse... it will be enlightening to see, Emerly."

I almost protested, heart racing at his using my proper name, until I saw Bettany's face.



"And, speaking of timing, you'll have quite a task pinning this one down," he continued, gesturing to Sever Malice.

"Dodgy."

"You'll find I have no problem with working out the details. I can be flexible. I am so flexible that we could begin now."

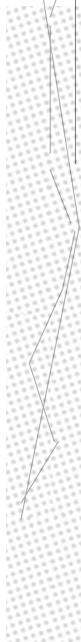
"I'm sorry?"

Sever Malice was unaffected. he looked straight at me. "Would you like to hold our preliminary now?"

Bettany laughed hastily. "A good joke, set! Oh, that it were so easy. But the crew of a lawship is bound to a very specific standard; you'll excuse the red tape. These things must be private, and all the regulations observed."

"Must they?" He raised his voice. "I'd think it a better system for public figures to have sessions in the public square. Why wait for the hearings to let my community hear what I have to say about all your questions. My work, my process? What would you like to discuss?"

People were watching. It was not that a crowd had formed, only that so many eyes were on us, from all across the





room. The gazes had been gathering for some time, ever since Sever Malice had stalked over to the other highest-ranking among the staff. Rain Flower looked to be panicking, unsure whether to remain next to Henarl or dodge the attention himself and join the crowd.

Bettany shook her head, short and simple. "I'm sorry, but that would be too irregular."

Sever Malice continued, his bold voice in the slowing room. Whispers behind him. "It would be hard to find a place more irregular than Savannah, la! If privacy is a concern, pick whichever corner you'd like," he said, pointing at my satchel, "and consider leaving your devices behind."

Bettany opened her mouth; this time I was the one to cut her off. "Set Pearl Wall, there are non-negotiables. Standard stands with all its process for a reason, some things we cannot change for the sake of whim and circumstance." I turned my lie detector over and over in my fingers, running my finger-nails down the spiral grooves of the active surface.

"And standard also swears you to servitude to the people of the Ecumene. Is that not us? I know I am at the top of your list, can't I speak frankly after being targeted?"



"Sever," Coteshinoeleon said, gently touching him on the shoulder. "Enough."

And at hearing that, the growing crowd vanished. Every head turned away, every conversation continued from where it had been arrested.

"Procedure is procedure, we're all doing our jobs. So put that off for another hour! Here, prefect, there's still a few drinks you haven't tried."

He and Bettany ushered us to a new table, holding some sort of buffet. Sever Malice hung back with me.

"You don't realize where we stand, lieutenant. We will talk, and talk soon, and it will be tonight. Acceptable?"

"O-of course. Set, I've been the one continually arguing for speed."

"Speed is always good. But I won't allow you to rush without realizing what this place is. You saw that awful video, my scoffing and preening. How frivolous the idea of Savannah once seemed. But who can deny what a golden beacon it has become since? Nothing in the world was able to prevent its manifest. Why did they send you, all green-





lings?”

Somehow, I did not flinch at this. I looked him in the glittering eyes, listening.

He nodded. “Know this: the world has rejected one of its true wonders. Nothing can compare. This is no equal to Medina, or Kozue - this will be greater yet. This is all but holy ground. And if you mean to talk to me, as that prefect does, knowing only how to wheedle and cajole, you can never see it. Poor girl, your machines and mandates. What will you do?”

“Emelry?” Bettany called, from a table where the rest had ended up. “Come join us! You must try the swan roast, they’ve even real cranberries here!”

“I will soon!” I called back, and answered Sever. “Then, you are asking for tonight?”

“Of course, you’ll not see me anywhere so bright as this again. My office, midnight.”

“Very well.”

“You’ll forgive the silver intensity. I have my duties, too.”



He moved one knee, and was sailing away across the strange golden cathedral of a room.

Bettany looked like she wanted to hit me when I was back. We laughed more, and ate, and I felt the weight of this world's palace walls.

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We stormed down the hall together.

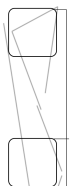
"Will you stop pouting?" Bettany asked, just keeping up with me. The corridor flew by. "You did fine, despite the outburst. There was tension, yes, but..."

"I am doing my best, prefect, to act how you have asked. Why are you surprised when I come off as unnaturally as you do?"

"Very well! There's no need for barbs. I appreciate the effort, I've told you that. What did Sever say to you?"

An anger welled up in me. "I don't know. I don't like it. I am scared enough already, at the crowd back there, much less his strange midnight errands."

"I wish I could say it was as simple as us drawing atten-





tion.” Bettany said. “But that was a bit beyond typical social dynamics, perhaps even a supercohesion. Really, Emelry, I wish you had left out the talk of interrogation entirely.”

“But is that not what you asked of me? That pointed eagerness? I do what I can, but I cannot just... dance on command! I was standing up for myself.”

“And doing so too much, getting us further away from the script, from cover. It all resolved well today, but you have to think! You were warned it was a sensitive subject for the set. So, what did he say?”

“Shadows and secrets,” I spat. “I’m to meet him alone this night, as he has some grand announcement, or lesson to give me. I do not know.”

“Good! That is good! A guilty conscience, do you think? He certainly is cryptic. You’re frustrated, why?”

“Because,” I said, pushing off especially hard from a passing wall, “you are micromanaging. Let me be, let me think, let me operate as I was trained to.”

“Will you slow down?” she said, speeding up behind me in turn. I kept just ahead of her. “You’re going to hurt



yourself, again.”

“We’re needed at the ship.”

“Emelry! This is too fast,” she said, catching up, grabbing my arm, and pushing us both into a spin down the corridor. “Can we please have a conversation?”

My other arm went flailing, “Speak for yourself! Let go of me!”

She did not. She stabilized us and kicked off the walls until we had ceased our breakneck pace. We came to a rest, Henarl zones and zones behind us.

“Really? That was dangerous! You must stop acting so childish -”

“Childish!” I batted her hand away. “Have you not demanded that from me, prefect? First I am excluded from any command decisions on the voyage, and now you mean to move my tongue for me, and use me as scapegoat. By what right? You really think you can treat me like this, make demands -”

“Yes! Yes, I do think so, by the right of prefect! Where in the world do you think you are?”





I looked away. "A mausoleum."

"So flippant; does this mean you are at last comprehending the scale? Are the numbers affecting you? We are no longer in academy war games, where you've the luxury to posture and pout. I need you! I need you now, Emelry, and I need you with me. Is it not so terribly delicate, bitter since the beginning? Yet this is the crucial stage."

"I know. I know. I know it is." I caught my breath. We'd perched in a doorway between two empty antechamber, the sharp marble threshold cold on my lower hands.

"Thank you, you're listening now," she said - almost gently, but then raised her voice again. "But evidently, you do not! We've now confirmation of a cult, confirmation that whatever is down there, ghosts banging on our door as we sleep. I cannot we can no longer bicker. I cannot argue with you, nor force you to do anything. But you need to look at yourself, the situation we're in. It's your job to read people; my job is to read you. And Emelry? You aren't at the best I know of you, not when you're distracted."

I sighed. "Then, enlighten me, dearleader. What is it that is distracting me, besides fear of the dark and aggravation at my management?"



“See how well you can listen.” She smiled, and smoothed a loose fold of my hood for me. “But it’s clear, to me at least. You are so caught in the need to be, and stand well, that you forget how to maneuver. We have nothing to prove to these people. We are here for one purpose, and must make that purpose seem convenient.”

“You’re right. That is my issue. I don’t like the secrecy. I know you think it necessary, and it may well be. But that was not what I have hoped for. It is not the proper role of a haruspex.”

“I know. But can you make peace with that? That a bit of rule-bending is necessary when we work at this scale?”

Henarl was quickly catching up with us again, panting and confused. “I can’t stand you, Bettany John.”

She looked satisfied with that. Henarl blustered at us about being so reckless, Bettany laughed him off, and we returned to our little ship.



Bettany swept through the airlock with hardly a look, yanking off her hood and tying it to her cubby in one fluid mo-





tion. Henarl hurried after her, making a scene in getting his outdoor footgloves off and finding his indoor ones. Anahit waited hesitantly at the door, exchanging a muted “good morning” with Bettany before creeping in with me.

“Welcome.”

“Hello.” I unpacked my bag into its cubby, keeping only my notes.

“Are you all right?”

I handled my things too roughly, slamming the little door with a muffled echo in the room. “Yes, well. Just a minor disagreement on the way back.”

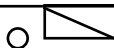
“Oh... is she being terrible again?”

“We all are. Has the letter arrived, by the way?”

She brightened. “Yes! Earlier than expected, we’ll watch through it over a meal.”

“Ugh, I don’t know if I could eat more...” Brunch was so full of food, little drones flying new little morsels over every few minutes. All far too rich.





"Well, it is here regardless! It came in not an hour ago. It turns out, the handlers are quite close to us along the wheel, isn't that lucky?"

"I'm glad our happy administrators have at last found the time for us... have you watched it already, what are they saying?"

"No! No, of course not, I'd hoped to watch all together..."

"Everyone take ten and we'll have some theater!" Bettany called from deeper into the rooms. Anahit smiled at me apologetically.

"And there we are! Seems she wants to get it over with. Come, Emelry, let's be happy for the taste of home."

When we'd regrouped in the library, Didion had finished setting the screens to the emblem of the archdiocese. Our Ilion logo—a fairy-knight chess piece, winged and reversed—hummed reassuringly, the engine in its base whirring. The screen shifted to a video of two neotenes side by side in a cramped cycler cockpit—Tivali and Matali Fatima, the twin haruspex supervisors assigned to our crew.

Of course it would be them. The archdiocese always kept





classmates close to each other in the field, but it was not every class that was lucky enough to include twins; material for the navigator course. They were of our year, and had themselves recently moved into a wheeler ship, one that was nearly as new and fresh as ours. The corps have must be trying to put its best foot forward — fresh young faces in fancy new ships, the lot of us. That it was them that made all this seem even more of a charade.

“Hello, you happy few!” The woman waved. “Terrible apologies for not checking in sooner, but I trust you’ve been adjusting well!”

“‘Not checking in sooner’, she says, breathing down our necks.” Bettany muttered. The video continued.

“Oh, I am envious! All the footage of the place has looked marvelous, it must feel like flying to be there. They’ve afforded us the privilege of some of the pre-release promotionals, but of course nothing substantial... the big day is so soon!” she said, Tivali nodding along.

Bettany was grating, but she had the skill of her role. The twins had gained their office by their twinhood, and had never had much interest in the duties of study.



"Ah, erm, to matters of business," she coughed. "Ti?"

"Yes. Chain of command is still unstable here, as you may have guessed. Everyone is still adapting to their assignments, rushed and fledgling.." her brother spoke up, and Bettany tipped her head back in a silent groan. "It is what it is."

"We are all flying solo, so please do lean on us," Matali chirped. "Now that we are official representatives of the archdiocese, you'll find we can be an excellent resource!"

Even Tivali couldn't be too enthused at that. "Um... well, I suppose we should to guidelines, get our thoughts on the table. Now, the... stature of the audit may be discouraging. But don't let it be. This is not meant to be a deep probe. Savannah, by all accounts including yours, has been a quiet project despite how it may appear. The staff is only in the thousands, no? Olkha and Mon have been rather close in consultation with us, and especially with your assignment, so before getting into the specifics please know the standard really should be archival and historical documentation. What we're looking for most is matters of design ethos, hopes for the future, collaboration for the grand opening.."





Matali took over again. “We would like preliminaries to begin within a week or two, once you’ve had the time to settle in.” Bettany shot me a look at that. “But, if you are looking for a place to focus your concern, Emelry... we’d also be interested in the temperature there, among the lunic staff. The construction history is... well, we will just say that Novarian archdiocese is still very concerned about the scale and pace of it all. As I’ve said, a light probe! No need to go digging. But, if you do notice anything, we would like confirmation on if there is any conflict with the Hightower proprietary mandates. Any... extraneous techniques, equipment, things of that nature. But that’s the only big thing, I suppose... oh! And of course, the apostate girl! Speak with whoever you can in sales, I still remember that sunbeam...” I couldn’t help but scoff at the last point.

“We’ve been looking over the records from the decommission, how she ended up on staff. All by the book. But one never knows, and the HR director was... not particularly helpful.”

“And...” she said, checking the notes they’d written, “There’s... not much job stuff left to say, really. You’ve all your orders, and by this point know the place better than, well, anyone else in the world. All we can say from here is,

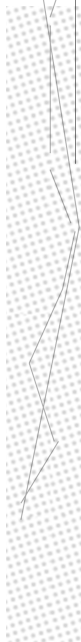


good luck! I... ooh, I just wish we could see it.”

Tivali cleared his throat. “I hoped we could use the rest of the time for some other news. We know you’re still on the socials blackout, and may appreciate some updates. So, this is mostly for Didion, but Maren and Si got assigned right after you departed. They’re at Rufus, also a Triactis project, but it’s fir the thirty-year review. I think a lot of the class is ending up with Triactis, at least among those who’ve received their assignments. Did you know Umiho-taru was only the second to depart?”

“And so new! The Spiruline is beautiful, it’s made embark-ing so much easier. I’m so glad this is a new crew, mostly traders and specialist doctors for the moment, but we’re hoping it will fill up soon! I don’t know what I would have done if we had to take over from retiring navigators... ah, but I’m rambling. That is where we are, but on to the girls’ side! Cabeya made prefect and was straight off to that new solar hab, also a grand opening. We’re quite the presti-gious year, no? They’re still in transit, Jami ended up right with her on the Dyata...”

Half the video was dedicated to class gossip. Our year was composed of roughly fifty aspiring haruspices. strong, and only thirty-two had graduated, in six crews and one nav-





igator pair - there was only news of the graduates. At last they signed off with a “We miss you, Anahit, and everyone else.”

“Hope you’ll be back by the end of next year. Mon says you should be. We’ll see you then.”

“Signing out! Enjoy yourselves enough for the rest of us, alright?” And the screen blinked back to the logo.

Anahit broke the silence. “That was... nice, really.”

“Though barely a work call,” Kaitei mumbled.

Bettany clicked the screen off and turned to face the rest of us. “God, they are such... right. Anyone require another viewing?” she tilted.

“No,” Henarl said. Kaitei shook his head next to him, and Anahit was quiet and slightly confused.

“Good. I can’t tell whether to be glad or terrified,” she said. “Henarl, thoughts.”

“It seemed a bit misguided.”

“Misguided! I say we cut most contact, if I am honest,”



Bettany said. "Keep it sterile and professional, for dignity and caution, bare minimum communications. Oh, I want to tell them nothing, really. Am I wrong here?"

"I don't like the idea of shutting them out," I said. "They're a silly pair, we've known that. It's only something to work around. Is it prudent to be so cagey?"

Anahhit spoke up, "Prefect, wait. What do you mean by cut contact? I... now, more than ever, as we prepare to explore... they must be brought up to speed on our fears! Can we not float the idea of a hostile audit, at the least?"

"Anahit, Olkha's feeding them orders as we speak, and they're telling us to put on kid gloves. 'Not a deep probe'?! The one thing we are sure of is the intractable, pervasive connection to Weylbloom, and like it or not, she is another point on that map."

"What?" Anahit asked, scandalized. "How could you imply she, of anyone, would fall to a cult. I know all three of them, you know them too, it isn't fair to throw away trust so quickly."

"With these numbers, I don't think we've the room for trust. I make no implications, but we are better off saf-





er. And besides... haven't we been having technical difficulties? On a lawship just months out from construction? Please, that doesn't happen."

Kaitei nodded along with that, and I found myself agreeing. He continued, "The systems interruptions. Do you think there's been some type of compromise?"

Anahit blanched. "W-what? Do you mean, a wiretap?"

Kaitei shrugged, "That's never been my field, I specialized in hardware and medical. I always saw the possibility as absurd."

Bettany nodded, "It's very, very possible. I was not enthused about linking our systems, but we could hardly refuse. They may be intercepting anything in and out. I feel we must operate under this assumption; that command is careless at best, and that any transmissions will be heard. I don't think it's safe to call for help."

"But... but if something happens to us!" Anahit broke out. "And truly, do a few crossed wires suggest so much?"

"Here we are again," Kaitei mumbled.

"Are we... afraid of the leadership?" Didion asked, frankly





and unaccusingly. The room paused a beat at his uncharacteristic forwardness.

"Oh, deeply, of course," Bettany said. "But only of what they are doing. Indoctrination is present, but likely not fanatic in the majority of staff. If I've guessed correctly at them being vitalists they're strictly nonviolent. What they take nonviolent to mean is anyone's guess, however, hence the potential breach."

"And are we truly sure it is a cult?" he continued. "It's a distant outpost built for grandeur yet winning no recognition. They've toiled for decades, as shunned as you may imagine. We must make far more allowance for strange ideas and bitterness, for some divergence at least. Emotions run high here, it is Triactis, the project is strange. If we are to call it such, it must be fair."

"I understand, I really do. We'll be charitable. But it is incontrovertible. I am convinced these are the same subcell that originated in the lower-ranked Weylbloom staff, and malcontents in the Triactian academies. There is not much of a distinction, only the widening of the experience of life rather than its infinite sustainment."

"What does that mean?" Anahit asked.





"I'm not sure. It's not so simple to go and ask. But it definitely means the creation of whatever is the interior, and the effects up here seem to go no further than minor hedonism and the social experimentation we're used to with Triactis. Inoffensive, the parts I've seen." She paused. "But how could they expect us not to know by now? The scrys were so easy..."

Anahit looked ready to cry. "I knew it, you know. The first thing I said when we left, the first thing I said when we arrived. Why did it have to be the first assignment? What is wrong with them, it's all so heavy, I..."

"Speaker, please? Don't whine. We've a job to do; we are those who stand up then. This is our lot."

Didion spoke as Anahit shrunk into herself. "Then, the plan is...? I trust Tiv and Mat, but what you've said is reasonable. Should we assume command is unreliable and the staff perverse; what are we to do? Where is our recourse?"

"I want to know! I want... a full, deep picture of what is happening here, what has been born here. Whatever complete history we are all satisfied with, while maintaining the image of ignorance throughout. And then, I suppose... yes. When we have that, we will immediately go to the See.



Henarl was right. That is the scale.”

The meeting ended in low spirits. We put together a short draft of our response, but left recording it for another day, when we had the heart for it. Fewer people yet we could put trust in, and now the highest response was our only possible one. What would happen when we did call the See? Leave, and let their proceedings here go unmediated? Stay, and cower for nine months from the resentful staff?

I saw few ways out of something I knew so little of. I saw it on all of our faces - even Bettany's frown was strained, something wild and cold in her eyes.

“Sainshand,” Henarl said, catching it in me. “We will be well.” He walked me out of the library again, as the meeting fizzled out and we slowly gravitated to our tasks. “This is still what we have prepared for. It will be well.”

I thanked him, but his kindness was yet another strange, strange thing of Savannah.

Sleep was predictably fitful. Bettany read a while before falling asleep with her tablet still on, and I stayed up lon-



ger. I watched the great white arcs of the docks' structure looming from the window. The occasional maintenance automaton skittered like a small sea-creature from pylon to pylon, miles away.

As to how many miles, who could guess. At a certain scale you stopped trying to make sense of it. I was restless sleep would only give me a cycle of dreamless dark and fidgeting. No use.

Anahit had never come to bed. I distentagled myself from the hammock and loped out to the rest of the ship. Betany had put the lights on a 24-hour cycle like the rest of Savannah, and it would have been utter dark if it were not for the warm lights from the library, the low cold white of the kitchen lamps, and the reflected sunlight from the bleached bones of Savannah. I passed through the ceramic halls with their bronze filigree, and sure enough, Anahit was in the kitchen.

She floated at the center of the room, curled up with a tablet and turning gently in midair.

"Hello, you."

"Emelry!" she unfolded, and her lower hands snatched a



perch to face me. "Why are you up? You need the rest more than any of us. Not another night excursion?"

"You've guessed it." The kitchen was lit low and cold, and her eyes were sunken. "But no camping trip this night. I'd hoped to get some rest before my appointment with set Pearl Wall."

She found the bitterness in my voice and matched it. "He is certainly demanding. Meetings at midnight, you shouldn't allow it."

"He's particular, I've been warned of it so many times I've lost count." I rummaged in the refrigerator but could see nothing I could stomach. The richness of brunch still weighed on me. "Frankly, I'd like to be through with it, and I will play the game if it is faster."

"Hey..." she said, closing the door and taking my hand. "Just postpone next time, okay? You've had a hard enough day already with those hours with her. You shouldn't have to spend so much time with others."

"No, Anahit, worry less. This is my role, it's only growing pains. What are you up so late with?"





“Just... reading,” she said. “Looking through Didion’s dossier for clues, but nothing makes sense tonight. Emely... look at you. You’re not taking care of yourself. Even the twins said we should be taking our time. I know there are concerns now, suspicions of our own... and I know you’re stressed, of course we all would be.”

“I’m not.” I drew away.

“Well, alright. But you never snap at me when you’ve a grip on yourself.” she said, drawing back in turn and pushing back to her perch. Her fists were little balls on her lap.

I explained to her carefully, joining her at the table. “I apologize... look at us, still awake. Remember, I could go forty hours back home with no trouble? And here I am falling apart after a few missed naps...”

“Hehe!”

“What? Why do you laugh?”

“You are crazy! That’s not something to brag about, you know. You treat insomnia like a favorite credential?”

“If there’s ever a time where overwork could help! Ah...”



"I know, I know..." She sobered some, and put one hand over mine again. "Oh! I was meaning to ask, after the call... did you ever spend much time with them? The twins, I mean."

"You really underestimate how unique the speaker course is, dear. They don't let us common-curriculums even meet with navigators outside of a few planned events, they're much too busy with their exercises. Maybe you and your lavendries."

"I know that." She giggled again. "And you underestimate people's ability to meet outside of the classroom or crew. Considering your family, I'd assumed Tiv and Mat would have been interested in you, even if not you in them. A blessed lineage," she intoned, mimicking lady Olkha's voice.

"Oh, this again." It was true that my line was rich in twins my grandfather and his brother, several removed cousins I barely knew, and that plenty more were in the corps. It was an easy opportunity. "I do not understand why they are all so set on bringing it up... Bettany's been talking it up to the staff, I suspect, intent on making it about more than luck."





“Still... I envy you.”

“What, the stuffy family? Please, you’d never need.”

“Well... just that you are more prepared for this sort of thing. I had so little image of what to expect... often I have thought that the speaker course is all prayer and practice, little of the practical.”

“Having family in the corps rarely remedies that,” I said. “You hear a few more stories, travel a bit more, perhaps. But the confidentiality and oaths still loom. I expected none of this, either.”

She reacted little. She touched each of her fingertips together, one by one. “I... I really, really, really don’t want to be here any more, Emelry...”

“Hey...”

“It is only... I come to feel lost. Emptied. As if the world blinked out behind us the moment we made dock.”

“And yet the sunlight still finds us, Anahit.” I took her hand, and gently pushed us closer to the window. “I was watching as I turned in bed. See, how those bones of the docks are glinting with it. Adonai is here, alone as we may





be - I know this half so well as you do. What else would we need, to let us work and try?"

She gave a slight, crooked smile. "Perhaps. Perhaps..."

"There's plenty to worry of, dear. But if my family's stories have managed to teach me a thing, it's that the homesickness will fade. We are already used to it, all of us. At the dawn of Ilion, the first indigo children born upon the wheel — did they not too feel as if the world was behind them? We are yet in the world. The void is kind, whenever light is in it, and it is the same void as home."

"Aha!" she sniffled. "You... see? You are so sure of yourself. And I... I..."

"Anahit, it will be well. We will leave again, whole and hale, and the months will too heal whatever ails this place. If the world is behind us, sun shines at our back. Cling to that."

"Do you promise?"

"Always, always."

Malice in truth! I glanced at the clock Bettany had nailed to one of the walls. The hour grew closer, and I could not





chance being late with the man.

"You should go," Anahit said, carefully, "it's alright. I'll be well. It's... just the cycle hitting me. My temperament will stabilize. You can go."

"I'm sorry."

"No!"

"Will you be awake when I am back?"

"Ha. I do not know. God willing, I will sleep soon - but it seems unlikely. I've caught the bug."

"All right... oh, Anahit, would you walk down with me?"

"No," she said, a quiet smile. "The night, in those halls? No, it would serve me ill. It's alright, Emelry. You should go."

We said goodbye, and suddenly I was back in the stark cold of the sleeping facades.



The central lunic offices were alive with activity, even this late at night - more appropriately, because it was so late. Silvers were defined by their nocturnalism, and each of



them here were in their element, just as Sever knew he would be.

Again, here were the early tendrils of weight. My bare feet found the strange paths and stairs of the lunic quarter, every bit built for giants. There were echoes of the design that went into the receptor offices, but none of the concrete. Here was all soft grass and broad cushioned walls, and lovingly carved filigree under glittering screen-skies.

It was so strange to remember people lived here, made homes here. I passed through, the occasional whisper or wave from those socializing on the balconies, but for the most part I was ignored underfoot. Workplace and residence could merge here, I thought, as I was passed by the occasional passerby loping along at their incredible long-legged speeds. Here was a haven, outside the logic of prepackaged purpose that defined the upper levels.

In the comfort of his office Sever Malice was regal a far cry from his sneering demeanor I'd seen at brunch. Still aloof, make no mistake, but self-possessed. In his fur chair behind his great mahogany desk, filled with trinkets and models and unrecognizable species of potted plants, he stared at me unflinching from the moment his secretary showed me the way in. He was dressed in an even





more elaborate getup, lips and eyes done up in violet and ultraviolet both, subsumed in a business gown so black that its folds were invisible. It was a bold choice, surely sacrilegious to those who had exiled him. A statement, as clinging to his title was.

The room was lit low and golden-gray, like century-old candles.

“Good evening, set Pearl Wall,” I said, hesitating. He nodded back at me, indicating I should sit. I complied, and I took one of the chairs across from him and winced as I settled into it—it touched my arms, my back, suffocating and designed for those much larger than I.

“It’s night. Are you well?” he asked, with a hint of that purr I’d heard in his voice before. We were at the foot of the throne he’d built for himself. “Being here cannot be best for your constitution. Water, cushion, anything?”

“I believe I will be well,” I said, adjusting in the seat. “Thank you, but the weight is something we’ve been preparing for. I must be used to it soon, after all.”

“Razina did mention the excursion. I’m glad you’ve insisted on it. You’re really going though, not just sending a



drone?"

"It's what we've decided on. Our prefect has been quite set on seeing the interior proper, and it's fallen to myself and our scribe."

"Ah," he smiled, "the other one I haven't met. It's good you're visiting, it really is, God knows those assigned down there could certainly use the company. Such a hamlet."

Of all the staff of Savannah, Sever Malice I had been dreading speaking with the most. Perhaps none of my candidates were so far from myself, with so towering of a reputation. He had been vicious at brunch, Beckon had gone to great pains to warn me of his temperament - but now that I found myself with him, alone, there was little intimidation left. But the last dregs of it still made me swallow, when I reached across the table.

"Sever Malice, I thank you again for scheduling with me so promptly. I apologize for any offense that may have been given this morning. But I meant it then: some parts of this process are not optional." From my pocket I drew my detector, and carefully placed it before me. "I will waive the proper application. But it must be present, if we are beginning in earnest. Do you understand?"





For a moment he sat there frozen, his only movement a slow, extended crossing of his arms. He broke into a grin.

“Oh, what, did Beckon tell you to be gentle? I, I assure you, am aware of the trick. You are the one with the gun, lieutenant, you are free to speak plainly. Has this turned hostile since yesterday?”

I froze, my heart quickened, and as soon as it did I knew he saw it. I was close to panic, and could only think of Bettany;s casual “good luck” message so I let myself jolt.

“What?” My voice wavered. “W-what do you mean? Why would it be? Set, this is an irregular audit, but it’s been only days. Hostility is not even in the realm of imagination at the moment. Is - is there something I need to know? If... you’ve called me here to speak frankly.”

He let out a small puff of air, and rested his chin on his hand. “Oh, get out of the headlights already. I have to ask, everything else is so irregular. It’s hard to picture you as sent here for my secrets. But you must understand my paranoia.”

“You’re right, I... of course. I understand. Thank you,” I said, and made a point of self-consciously smoothing my



clothes as I sat back in the seat again. "I can assure you easily, I will ask you nothing of Lune. That is not in the audit's scope, unless you choose to make it so."

"Hm," he laughed. "Really, you are so worked up. How much of the story did he tell you?"

"What I asked; the reasons for your arrival here. We need to know some of what the Board has censured, but only the outline of events. It was my decision, my interest, I make no apology."

"Such a gossip," he said with an airy smile, letting himself drift back in his chair. "Tarnishes so easily. Very well, no harm. Tell me, why is it you?"

He was toying with me. Tangents and dramatics. Perhaps it would have upset me, a day ago, so I frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"Why are you here," he sighed. "You know how I feel of Savannah, how pivotal its existence is. But Saniasa sends me fresh kids in a bright plastic ship. Lottery, nepotism, sending a message? It bothers me."

He still had not taken his eyes off me. I pushed myself up in the chair, its armrests just high enough to be irritating.





“Assignments went out perhaps a week before launch. Our destinations and crewmates were classified until then. Who knows why it was us? The magnitude of the task continues dawning on us, I doubt any besides the prefect were entirely ready for it - how to chart a continent from scratch. But, set, if I may. A haruspex is as good as they ever will be on the day they graduate: experience is not the key to the role, for each audit is one for an entirely new community. Each is the task of understanding a small world, a new world. Does that serve as answer? I am confident.”

“If you say so. I still say you’re too young for this,” he said, unfazed. “And, by the way, we’re running out of time, and you’ll leave when its up. But one question from me: you’re Ilian, the ever-unreachable market. I’d like to know your impressions of Savannah when you arrived, architectural-ly. Indulge me?”

“Excellent,” I grinned. “I’d hoped to ask of your process, your goals with the project. Our first impressions were shock!”

“Oh?”

“Clearly, Savannah was built stark and secret, hiding its





colors. Part of that was familiar; it is as white and purposeful as Saniasa... ah, have you been, set?"

"Of course! The city proper and the region both. It's quite different, deceptively large, the city. I'll admit, some of its design philosophy influenced us in building out the caps. I fear it's been years and years, however, and since I've last been several new habitats have gathered there."

"I'm sure. I was at academy there when Snow Bride was flown in from Furtive Needle."

"Really! A Still Harp piece?"

"Is it? You'll excuse me, I'm not at all familiar..."

"I'd thought she retired," he said. That had upset him, somehow, and not the indignancy I'd come to expect. He looked hurt, in a small way, but so sudden that he forgot I was there.

"It was a beautiful one. The blue glass of the skies, the silver-shield hull... Oh! But what I meant to say. Saniasa, Saniasa proper is built old. Grand, but no prettier outwardly than any mining establishment, and not quite grand enough for a sky within. But it truly is a masterwork





of unweighted urban design, not only functional but a joy to live in. Like flying." He gave me an odd look, and I gave a nervous laugh. "Ehe, you'll excuse me if my interests are small in scale. A homemaker's sensibility, not a monumentalist's. But the point I am coming to is that Savannah seemed... emblematic, in the same way. Confident enough to be stark, real enough to be wide."

"Stark?"

"The bones of a world, no? You said as much. When we first arrived, the scale was terrifying. Even now... those habitats I saw from my dorm in Saniasa, it is difficult to picture them as true cities, rather than trinkets in the void. But Savannah is unmistakable."

He considered me. "That is illuminating. I appreciate it."

"I've said very little."

"Nevertheless!" He stood up, his head shooting dangerously close to the distant ceiling. "Time, lieutenant, time. When are you visiting?"

"The interior? Not - not for another week or so, sel. Is there something there I should pay attention to?"



"Hmm," he purred. "No, not for me. I've had little opportunities to direct the interior construction, much too busy out here. The lunic quarter is the only place I've had real input in - the rest was done by committee, the receptor offices by Throne."

"Throne?"

"Oh! Some old mentor of Cote's. Or rival? I'm not entirely sure, it's ancient history - before even my time, if you can believe anything wass," he chuckled to himself, picking up one of the trinkets on his desk - a tiny woodframe model of a habitat, complete with mirror-windows folding out. He clacked one of them open and closed, and continued. "No, my peers are the doctor's, really. You've been in contact with her, I've heard?"

"Dr. Savelyevna? Oh, very much. She's insisted on leading our preparative regimens, and fate seems to cross my path and hers quite frequently."

"No accident there, I'd say. More capsaisin than iron in that woman's blood. I've known her most of my career; in my apprenticeship we worked on several canopy pieces together. Root Light, Sugar Bowl, Point Peace - all subterranean. She specialized in that, before everything."





He looked at me, expecting me to interrupt. "I was not aware of that. The crew manifest is strangely limited in parts, set..."

"I am sure it is."

"This time as colleagues, was it before Savannah was conceptualized?"

He stood with a grand sweep of his gown. "Before we knew of it, yes. I'm sure Cote had been throwing together steel beams at that point. The plans have been in motion so long. Hut I was young, and her younger, both rookies in those incestuous circles of the canopy craftspeople. But, lieutenant, what I mean to say that the interior is her purview, all the terroir and humus she works with. If you're still curious about the design of the land, I imagine she'll have plenty to say."

"I see," I said. I glanced at the flower-clock on his wall. A living Triactian mechanism; the stamens slowly, measuredly continuing to rise.

He paced to the corner of the room, examining the spines of one of his dusty bookshelves. "Yes, it's time. Lieutenant?"



“Set?”

“I like you, my husband likes you. You will be careful, down there by the river. Go in open, make friends? Would you?”

I stood in turn, gathering my things, though standing paradoxically let him loom even further above me. “Friends?”

“I’ve not much time to visit the village, and I won’t risk my bones as you do. But it’s good people there. Listen to them, if you can.”

“I... believe I understand, set. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” he smiled, wide. “Goodbye.”

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I awoke early, if I slept at all. The dread of tomorrow was palpable, eating at me in any position I tried to settle in. So I gave up.

The trains still ran at night, along with the added clanging of the railcranes. Apparently, they used the night to reset their machinery, and move materials to their morning destination. It was such a bizarre system. The Lunic weeks were hard enough to wrap one’s head around, but





the constant on-off, stop-start whiplash of the Heath cycle was absurd. As if being made to live in two worlds at once!

Of course I could not sleep. I dressed in a familiar old quilt — one I had sewn myself — and left Umihotaru once more. I strode out, clicking the airlock open and shut with only its confirmation lights, and the lamps from the kitchen, to light my way before the floodlights of the docks. From there I remembered my way to the train, which

Its scrolling displays read precisely three in the morning as I took my perch by the better window. I smiled to myself — lucky.

Tonight, it was storming far away, above the first lake. A great ring of thunderclouds arced around Savannah's spine; so vast were they that at any given moment tens of flashes of lightning were visible. They radiated out from the swooping clouds like a the pattern of a strange iris, and seemed so terribly close. The true length of the place, that distorted blue, was invisible. The sky ended with the storm.

Perhaps because of this, there was no overlook shock. The closeness was almost comforting. Hundreds of miles away and hundreds more below, it was a small world, one chan-



delier of lightning.

I quickly found a spot by the window railing, tethered myself, and closed my eyes.

It is a clever bit of misdirection, the lie detector. Of course it does no such thing. The human mind can only be charted from within; anything else is guesswork. Lies, too, are guesswork. There is no identifiable pattern as we would have you believe, no universal tic of face or pulse. Each person's mannerisms differ, as too do their conceptions of guilt and reality themselves. If there were a technique to read the essence of a soul, it would be assault, an unthinkable invasive cruelty. A process so frightening it must remain theoretical, never built nor planned. Those making the attempt were some of the first examples of glorification.

They say that the true distinction between gold and silver is an opposite sense of intuition; feeling opposed to thinking. They say omanhood is a complete understanding of each strain of human nature. Perhaps our breed of refinement, the art of wondering, lies somewhere between all these concepts. A flash of insight clearer and wider than thought can be.





The lieutenant's course ostensibly focuses on reading people. This is a skill that can be mastered in a year. The second field we learn, the secret field, is of the mind. None know this but we and the most veteran members of our crews. The "lie detector" is a personal locus, the key to a mind-palace. The accurate parsing of human nature cannot be done accurately in real time, it necessitates photographic memory extrapolated to the edges of comprehension.

The mastery of mind must be of one's own.

I was unpracticed, I had not wondered once since the voyage began. Not, even, since the last examinations at academy. What would I have wondered of? Our orders, the mission? I never would have thought to.

Lord Mon had once told me, in confidence, that while a crew must trust each other, a lieutenant must trust themselves. That our access is to truth, not interpretation. Was that true? I had no reason to trust it, as of yet, not on an assignment such as this. I held my key. Before I even looked at it, I focused every ounce of my attention upon the dark, textured jewel at its center. I took a deep breath, and held it to the level of my eyes, and found that iridescence flash at its center - the deepest part, my shard of



jade. Subtle, heavy, dropping, I found it.

The world went lavender. I projected up, into the bare wonder-land, and fell into my mind.

I echoed. I screamed and it echoed; I felt every pulse of the soundwave as it hit the glass, the concrete, the upholstery of the lounge over and over again. I forgot who I was, forgot my body, for a single terrible year-long second before I found the flow. Echo upon echo, I established the feedback loop, and felt my body on pure instinct drag itself stable again, where it had been choked by the tether.

I asked myself what I had missed.

I had been rushing the whole time. This was regrettable but good in the end. Bettany was good. I had been off-guard, distractible, their faces, I was underestimated. Awake, this would have hurt me, now it would not.

This was a failure in training, the offense at one's self. Bettany was right. How Anyndel's eyes had pierced me, that first day! He had been sharp, sharper than I knew, but in my ignorance I gave him nothing. He was obsessive, God, he was a true believer.





Who knew?

I knew not what he knew. But Sever knew everything. He was cryptic, encouraging me to be cryptic, counting on me to find his silver game, and I could. What was the project, the object of the cult? Simply a new species of humanity? Why the secrecy, the darkness? New Medina was built for experimental reverse-development, I had read, settled by volunteers attracted by the low-tech life, in search of the Delphic human spirit. There would be millions of volunteers, Triactis had long since mainstreamed post-birth modifications. Why? Searching for primitive purity the See could not dream of? Where was the ambition in this?

The major cults. Locus habitat, people with transparent minds - glorified. Weylbloom, people who could not die - glorified. Did they believe Savannah was too large for light?

I could strain no further. What was strange?

The portraits of Cote on the office walls, predictable personality worship. Beckon, at least, was entirely ambivalent about this, as if it mattered nothing. The skull at Red-names neck - did her old home keep birds, as the rest of us neotenes do? An old pet, an abstellar talisman, a symbol of



a shoreless dove? Savelyevna's laugh, always incredulous. Bettany's hands. Sever's disdain of the world, of everyone he looked at.

Was it about monoculture? Redname's one-from-many, the same fears that plagued the early Ecumene? These were all students of history. Why did she strive to look so young? She was taking something, botox, gentian, something. Fear of death, enshrinement of it? Everyone was so old.

Beckon and Sever. They were easy, the holes in them obvious. Entangled in the grandeur, each other, the little lunic community they had built—loyalty to the cult lest all that be stripped from them, cal Savannah... but neither were masterminds. Sever a pure preening architect, Beckon a follower at the core. The romance of the intern and his master, it felt like fate, it was fate that found them here, that tied them to their dark mission...

But none of them, none of them I had spoken to... cared. If there were new people in the interior, their plight weighed none on the conscience of the staff. No trace of guilt, no contemplation, only nerves. Nerves, and excitement. It was barely constrained, really.





They were not heartless, but if I had not seen the scrys, their apathy would give me doubt of the whole hypothesis.

I could take it no longer. I broke from the loop, and woke to a cloud of my own drool smeared on the glass. The storm continued, unfazed. I had lost three hours - good time.



The week passed quietly. Personally, I slept half a day, and moved from my preliminaries to the more methodical interviews. I regularly met with Beckon, often in the lower lunic centers — on the voyage I had glanced at what blueprints of Savannah were publically available, but they were both few in number and heavily redacted to shield the secrets of its scale from Hightower eyes. He walked me through the full ones, and they were completely unremarkable. The “secrets” were the same as New Medina’s: minor tweaks when adjusting to megascale.

Dr. Savelyevna called daily from the interior, meting out diet and exercise recommendations for Didion and I. He had prepared for this more than myself on the voyage, but was frail as he ever was. How could we undo centuries of biology in a week?



The medical staff here was certainly trying — and even as a lifelong outer-systemer, Triactian medicine still astounded me. Of course, being able to walk would not come so quickly, but at least physical therapy could be hurried to sonic speed with all the cocktails of ointments and appliques and injections we were drowned in. My sleeping had returned to normal, reestablishing their common naps rather than the knockout trigger I'd been given by way of the day cycle. Sleeping was fine — but between the alcohol and herbs, I had made sure I hadn't smelled for a week!

The morning after my third visit to the lounges, Didion recieved a final text from the doctor:

Glad to hear it. You're lucky you dont have issues with stamina. When you get down, make your way into town (call the bus we have if you need it. Actually I'll have it waiting for you. It can fit your walkers.) and we will be at the inward garden. We'll start you off getting some sun and seeing the greenhouse before anything else since there will be work being done today and from there we'll see how you're feeling and if you need a swim. We have submerged sleeping equipment might as well make the trip count. I don't really know what else you want to see here but let me know.

And from there it was only the train. Back to the same



station I had met Savelyevna. Didion, Kaitei and I went down past the lunic quarter, down past the zones of the caps that were powered and occupied, our feet beginning to touch the ground in the dim blue lights. Our litter followed, kicking off the walls at a safe distance behind us. It was a heavy thing by nature, heavier for the cargo of drones tucked away in its chassis. Somewhere between desk, quadruped mech, and cradle, it was the bare minimum needed for neotenes to cope with fullweight.

The train waited for us, and we loaded ourselves in. Didion and I settled into our seats, as secure as a proper launch, as Kaitei prepared his materials.

“So the central greenhouse is here.” Didion pointed out the largest building on the map, the one around which most of the others were clustered. “It is by the airstrip, beyond the fields and riverworks.”

“I hope it will be a gentle ride, at least. The ‘bus’ setup worries me.”

Didion laughed, short and bright. “Ha! Will it be dirt roads, do you think? Perhaps we should go by litter alone.”

Kaitei slid the needle from my arm and I rotated it at the



shoulder; the chill passed through me.

“And that’s the last. You’ll fall asleep within ten minutes, and your heartrate will be very up for a day or so. You’ve always been difficult to sedate.”

“I still don’t understand why all this is necessary. We could afford to stay awake, this is not exactly a launch,” I said, gesturing to the flimsy trappings of the train car.

“Out of the question. We’ve explained this again and again, any extra shock will serve you poorly. You’ll be worn out enough as is, you need the rest.” He clicked the last buckles of his cases, and stood with one in each hand. “Especially you. Will you be alright, so much time with the doctor? It does not sound like you two get along.”

“We’re getting there. Between the interviews and Bettany I’m quickly losing my shame response. It’s Cytiok here you should worry about.”

“Oh, please!” he pouted. “I’m readier than you, to be sure.”

Kaitei sighed, stopping at the threshold and leaning on one of his cases. “Anything that goes wrong down there





will get worse with time, and will not fade. This is an order: contact if there are any side effects, any conditions too harsh, any injuries. Early, you understand?"

"Of course, Kaitei," Didion spoke for me — we were both already feeling the creeping, dull exhaustion. "I'll be fastidious about it. We'll be on the next train up at the first scrape."

"We're of hardy stuff, engineer. I'm not looking forward to the crush either. But we handled the trip; I can handle this."

"Anything you say," he gave us a mock bow. "Well, good-night. Five minutes now, I'd say."

He left, and the door slid shut with a pressurized hiss.

"Sainshand," Didion began, when it was quiet. "What did you say last time, about the wind."

"Ah. I've not been able to worry of that further... I still cannot explain it, but it seems such a small detail."

"I'd like to read through any weather records they've kept at the monitoring station down there. The roll clouds, the..."



He fell asleep. Ha, weak constitution as always, he

I blinked and opened my eyes to a hammer strike upon my entire body. Didion was trapped in a painful fit of coughing. The trip was done, and no dreams.

For minutes we could not speak, only nod and point to each other as we came to, and eased out of the seats' restraints. I practically crawled across the wall - no, it was still floor - pressing so horribly against us, but finally found the litter - it had automatically deployed once the train came to rest. I pulled myself onto its boarding step, and my strength gave out entirely. I fell into the cushions. Didion was standing, but didn't look like he could for long.

"Cytiok. If you - if you'd mind," I squeezed out. I couldn't help myself, a laugh burst from me. It felt like a punch to the stomach, which only made me laugh more.

"What? What is it? Are you alright?"

"Oh, Didion! Would you come aboard already? You look simply remarkable like that, all stretched out. Here, come."





He refused my hand, and instead leaned on the litter's side railings. "No... no, I will manage."

It was strange being so intimate with him, waking up in the same room. But for that laugh we had not met each other's eyes today.

"You were serious? You do mean to walk."

"Y-yes, lieutenant. I'll be sure to ask for a ride if it proves too much for me, but I'd like to try."

"Remember. Don't push yourself."

I sank back into the cushioning of the litter, and finally felt stable, even with the persistent blast of weight washing over me. I had expected it to have a sound. The litter rose on its spindly legs as I steered it to slowly walk from the car, and Didion rose with it, still bracing against.

"We are meeting Dr. Savelyevna at -" he panted - "her offices. Fisher Valley is barely four by four zones... blocks, rather. I'll remember. I believe I can handle it." He straightened as best he could.

"Didion... before we leave. Have you had chance to see the interior yet? Beyond the photographs."



"Henarl and Yuu took me to one of the lounges last night, don't worry. We managed together." We all but limped out from the station together, taking five steps in a minute. But we eventually came to the doors, and as they opened for us, I heard him gasp.

He staggered against the litter. "My... my God."

The faux-sunlight of the spine, pale and thin and all-suffusing, stretched its fathomless line down the length of the cylinder, turning snakeline in that vortex of distant distortion I had seen before. Above us loomed a sky of continent, entire mountain ranges the size of my finger held at arms' length, sand and scrub painted in swathes hundreds of miles wide, beyond the blue tint. Gone was the fear I would fall into this vast airy empty - no, I was sure it would fall down on us.

We learned to look to the ground, and studied the dusty town road.

"Managing?" he asked, between pants. "I need - need only a moment."

I stopped the litter in its tracks. "Please, climb up, I insist. We've but barely arrived, no one has come to wel-





come us... where is the bus? You are already collapsing.” The pressure had worsened. It was a struggle to speak, to keep my eyes open, to bend my body upwards and sit. Everything, even the heat was oppressive. I had not been warned half enough.

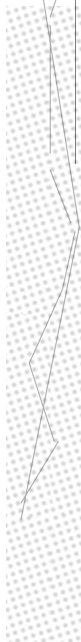
Didion threw his arm onto one of the higher railings, finally listening to me. I opened my mouth - but before I could speak, the sky fell after all.

A vague black shape plummeted into the litter, the knees buckling and chassis lurching as its balancing systems scrambled to account for the new weight. Didion fell to the ground as if struck. It stabilized quickly - and I was face-to-face with a raven.

It was hulking, the size of an eagle. Jet-black, earth-red, covered in cloth and tassels and little bones. It folded itself, pulled from its backpack a leather-bound notebook, and dropped it into my lap.

“Lieutenant,” it wheezed, in the voice I knew. “Met, on the road. You are arrived.”

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NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuosity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation

NOTES



whose change from *The Bears* is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY- Apart from works such as *Subahibi* or *Amygdalatropolis* or *No Tiger*, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. *Swords Under the Phosphor Sky* not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order

notes



to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leona's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes





their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

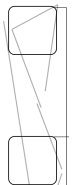
SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reality. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheromones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so



as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre. It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "-punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary" aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that *Cruelty Squad* is a cyberpunk text,





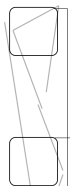
in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like Killer7 - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcél's PSYCHOGRAMMA.

PSYCHOGRAMMA routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the "second nature" that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexplicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk's pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas borrowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less post-



modern “metaverse” - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir lends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded “dream-thoughts” through cyberspace, inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream exemplified in works like *Serial Experiments Lain* - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopo-





litical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Fox-tel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN!-NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Punpun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real world.



The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanted, but such that its otherworldly setting is a key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply aban-





doned or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the “Heath cycle” - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of “wildness” as newly troubling freedom.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the “polyphony” Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the “languages” of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author’s imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispensable to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be under-



stood as intersubjectivity, and in which the “future” does not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of “small solutions”. Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanted life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.

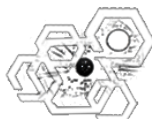




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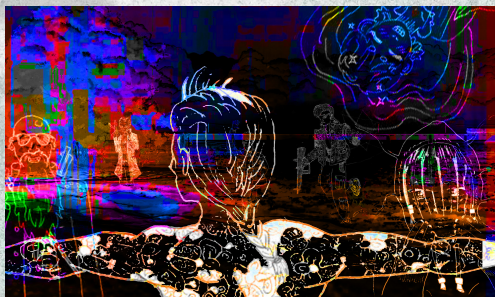
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Serialized fiction for the contemporary era



>> BEINGS ROAM THE PAVEMENT
REMAINS OF FUTURE INJURIES
WHAT EBBED INTO OUR LIMBS
THAT FOUND US ALONE
ON THESE SURFACES

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